

**The Numinous Land: Examples of Sacred Geometry and Geopietry in Formalist and
Landscape Paintings of the Prairies**

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Saskatoon

By

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Abstract

Landscape painting and formalist painting, both terms taken in their broadest possible sense, have been the predominant forms of painting on the prairie, particularly in Saskatchewan, for several decades. The two tendencies are not diametrically opposed, but related as parts of a spectrum; in the work of some artists both tendencies are plainly present. In an effort to understand the nature and endurance of this peculiar relationship, I interviewed a variety of prairie artists and discovered a significant yet unexamined aspect of prairie painting that may be considered an underlying cause. Based on the testimony of these and other artists, as well as an examination of their work, I reached the conclusion that it is possible to regard many examples of prairie painting as responses to encounters with the spiritual forces that inhabit familiar locales. If the land is sacred, then it is not surprising that representations of the land—and it can be argued that all paintings are ultimately derived from our experiential awareness of the earth—have a spiritual aspect based on the structure of the land. The evidence for this awareness of the sacred is found in archetypal geometric structures within the paintings and frequently in statements by the artists. Three of these archetypal forms, examples of a sacred geometry, are the Mandala or Medicine Wheel, the Horizon, and the Axis Mundi or World Tree. Sacred geometry occurs across cultural boundaries, within the Academy, in the work of unschooled artists, in innovative and traditional art forms, with or without the conscious intention of the artist. Because it springs from a poignant awareness of the physical environment it suggests an elevated reverence or geopiety that promises hope for ecological and cultural healing and wholeness.

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Dedication

To the late W.H. (Bill) Epp to whom I owe an eternal debt of gratitude.

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Introduction

Alive again, in a world filled with light! After bathing I go to the sacred place, a rug of prayers where I burn incense and bow and say the words of the prophet. I do not know how to properly do these things; I make my best guess. For I am of those whose heritage has been stretched thin across the Atlantic, worn thinner by prairie winds, then veiled and distorted by the hissing voice of television and crushed by the overwhelming weight of supermarkets until we do not truly know where we belong.



Figure 1 RCA Indian Head Test Card ca. 1940

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<http://search.creativecommons.org/?q=test%20pattern>

Accessed August 21, 2011.

My first hero was Roy Rogers. I dressed like him until I began to realize what was happening to all those falling Indians. In those days, television programming began in the morning and ended in the evening. In between, there was a test pattern, the image of an “Indian chief” in a full-feathered bonnet superimposed on what appeared to be a target not unlike a dartboard (Figure 1). One summer my cousins came to visit from California. My family took them for a picnic, to Fort Carlton as I recall, to see some Canadian history while enjoying the countryside. Cousin Cindy was afraid to leave the vehicle because there might be wild Indians. I assured her that there were no more Indians. I was convinced at that early age, as were my schoolmates and likely their teachers and

families, that, if there were, they were permanently and inaccessibly removed on reservations. This was the plain truth that emerged from my white middle class schooling.

My family's Saskatoon home was in a new neighborhood at the edge of the same prairie described by W.O. Mitchell in *Who Has Seen the Wind*?

Ahead lay the sudden emptiness of the prairie. ... The hum of telephone wires along the road, the ring of hidden crickets, the stitching sound of grasshoppers, the sudden relief of a meadowlark's song, were deliciously strange to him. ... the hip-deep grass stirring in the steady wind; the grass clung at his legs; haloed fox-tails bowed before him; grasshoppers sprang from hidden places in the grass, clicketing ahead of him to disappear, then lift again. ... And all about him was the wind now, a pervasive sighing through great emptiness, unhampered by the buildings of the town, warm and living against his face and in his hair. (W. Mitchell 1947, 11)

The prairie trails were my refuge and my inspiration, but the relationship was more complex. Like Mitchell's young protagonist, I was overpowered with awe at what Emily Carr called the "God-filled spaces" (Carr 1966, 3), with bewilderment because I did not know how to properly honour the land, and with grief because the prairie was being steadily destroyed, or at least divided and obscured.

Later, as a Boy Scout, I admired Grey Owl, even though I knew he was an English lord. I read his books and made the pilgrimage to his cabin because I believed, as I think he truly did, that Western culture was in desperate need of a more heedful relationship with the natural world, and that this attitude could only be learned from the original inhabitants.

By adolescence I was reading *Lame Deer* and *Black Elk*. I wore long hair and moccasins, played the role of "John, the Savage" in *Brave New World*, the high school play, wishing, like Archie Belaney, to be something that I was not. An idealized version of Native North American spirituality was one of several closely related and very powerful influences in my youth. Flower Power was also very real to me (in spite of later trivialization in television comedy) and profoundly affected much of my generation. Connected with it were influences more or less religious from around the world,

including Transcendental Meditation, Zen, American transcendentalism, Sufism, Christian mysticism, but most powerfully here in Saskatoon, the Bahá'í Faith.

In the summers I worked on a nearby farm. During harvest I sat in the grain truck waiting for the signal from the combine that the hopper was full. I would park beside one of the many sloughs and attempt to capture its delicate, fugitive beauty with pastels. That beauty was there before the farm, before humans, and still exists today as part of a complicated layering of nature and culture.

I also visited Emma Lake, where my family had a cottage, making the long boat trip to the art school at Murray Point as often as I could. Sometimes I would glimpse Ernie Lindner, who was my first real art hero, as he strolled along the beach to his nearby cabin. It was there (I think it was 1970) that I watched Donovan Chester painting with a push broom, and witnessed the intense absorption of Ed Epp at work behind paint-splattered glasses.

It was also that year that I tagged along with some of my friends to a Bahá'í Fireside at the home of Otto Rogers, where I was invited to see some of the work in his studio.

Much later, in my undergraduate studies, I painted the riverbank within the city, continuing an investigation of the relationship between the natural landscape and human interventions. During my studies in Canadian art history with Grant McConnell, I also conducted a short series of interviews with local artists to try to gain an understanding of the continuing importance of landscape painting “after the end of art.” This was in part a response to the theories of Arthur Danto and others who postulate that the narrative trajectory of Western art has come to an end, and that something entirely different is now taking form in the continuing work of a more global community of artists. In particular, I was interested in the persistence of landscape painting on the prairie long after it had been declared obsolete (or worse) by contemporary theorists. The question continues to intrigue me, and forms the core of the present inquiry.

The numinous land is where I reside—the spiritual, mysterious, transcendent land. I have been curious about other artists who may find their inspiration in the spiritual aspect of the landscape, or who may express such a connection without a deliberate

intention. This thesis is an attempt to demonstrate that painting is, among other things, a response to the numinous qualities of the land. I have little interest in explicit references to religious themes; occult mysticism and veiled references to spiritual matters hold equally little appeal. But there is evidence, both in the statements of the artists and in their paintings, to support the idea that there is an awareness of the sacred in the environment, or a yearning for it.

For many years there has been reluctance within the Academy to discuss spiritual matters because of the predominance of scientific materialism, but this is beginning to change with the increasing presence of Aboriginal faculty, staff and students and the growing awareness that it is only right to give “Thanks to the Creator for this day!” These were the opening words of Buffy Sainte-Marie, the keynote speaker at a recent conference on Teaching and Learning in Higher Education at the University of Saskatchewan, an event that was opened and closed with prayers from Cree elders. Many artists have avoided direct references to the sacred, but the prairie landscape, like others, has a spiritual as well as a geographic, political and historical aspect.

For the purpose of this study I have used the word “prairie” to indicate an indeterminate location roughly corresponding to, but not limited to, the southern part of the province of Saskatchewan. The words “sacred,” “spiritual,” “divine” and other related terms are intended to invoke the unnamable mysteries of the extra-mundane realm that are referred to in various ways by all cultures, and not to be in any way limited to the beliefs or practices of any particular religion. The expression “sacred geometry” has been used to describe a number of different schemes intended to demonstrate the relationship between the phenomenal world, human awareness and the Divine. The model that I develop has no direct derivation from any of these systems, but is archetypal, that is, occurring unconsciously and almost universally throughout human cultures. On the rare occasion that I use the word “we” I mean to include all humans.

As I began my research I attended a groundbreaking seminar jointly presented by Len Findlay and Sakej Henderson, where I first became aware of Findlay’s exhortation to “Always Indigenize!” His revelation utterly dispels and remedies the deception practiced on me as a child that “there are no more Indians.”

In the (human) beginning was the Indigene. ... It seems fair to say that all communities live as, or in relation to, Indigenes. ... there is no hors-Indigene, no geopolitical or psychic setting, no real or imagined terra nullius free from the satisfactions and unsettlements of Indigenous (pre)occupation. (Findlay 2000, 308-9)

In the context of this research, I take this to mean that I already live in relation to Indigenous people and culture, and that this relationship needs to be clarified and strengthened. I try to follow these principles: 1) I include Aboriginal artists as integral to this study, not as a separate category; 2) I speak with the artist in person, if possible, and if not I prefer to rely on the authority of an Aboriginal author; 3) I assume that the artist's views are personal and do not necessarily reflect a universal cultural perspective; 4) I assume that we are ultimately all one people; 5) we are on Treaty Land.

This thesis is based on a series of interviews with thirty Saskatchewan artists and curators (the resulting audio recordings of the interviews, as well as transcripts will be deposited in the University of Saskatchewan Archives). The artists represented are primarily painters, although one or two also practice sculpture or drawing as well. I have selected diverse painters who have been active (mostly) during the span of my own lifetime, that is, beginning in 1956. They are painters from a variety of backgrounds, working in various styles and for different reasons. It is true that I have selected artists whom I admire. However, in the process of making the selections, looking through many exhibition catalogues and several art collections, I have come to appreciate a wider range of painting including some artists that I had previously dismissed or disliked. Nevertheless, it is not a neutral or random selection, but a personal one that matches, and I hope in some cases confronts my own cultural bias. Some are Bahá'ís, as I am; many are personal acquaintances and dear friends. Others I have met for the first time during the course of the research and found their perspectives to be wide-ranging and often very different from my own. Most have been educated at the University of Saskatchewan or the University of Regina; most reside in Saskatoon or Regina.

The term "interview" is perhaps misleading, as there was no established form or standard list of questions, no statistical analysis. Instead, I met with the artists in a comfortable place, often in their studios, and we conversed about their work, their

education and experiences, about landscape, abstraction, spirituality and about art in general.

I found it necessary to speak to these artists in person because virtually all the literature at this point is in exhibition catalogues, with the notable exceptions of: Ronald Rees's very significant early history, *Land of Earth and Sky*; Francis, R. Douglas's *Images of the West: Responses to the Canadian Prairies*; Marketa Newman's foundational *Biographical Dictionary of Saskatchewan Artists*; Warner and Bradshaw's biography of Allen Sapp, *A Cree Life*; Dean Bauche's *Kiskayetum: A Portrait of Allen Sapp and his People*; Bob Boyer and Alfred Young Man's *Kiskayetum: Allen Sapp*; Terry Fenton's biographies, *Land Marks: The Art of Dorothy Knowles* and *Reta Summers Cowley*; Terrence Heath's *Uprooted: The Life and Art of Ernest Lindner*; Peter Millard's *Stryjek: Trying the Colors*; and Jean Swanson's biography of Robert Hurley, *Sky Painter*. The catalogue essays, many of them quite remarkable and useful, nevertheless serve the purposes of the exhibition curator, and therefore reflect a particular bias. It may be an effort to prove that the art fits within a certain theoretical framework, or it may be an endorsement of a particular painter who has been collected or promoted by the curator. Since there is nowhere objective ground to stand on, I feel that the best way to expand from this curatorial stance is to confront the artworks myself, from a personal and subjective standpoint, and also to find out directly from the artists what their intentions are. In some cases the artists also speak about each other's work. In this way a network or web of viewpoints is constructed (although never completed) that illuminates and informs the paintings from several directions.

Since I want to avoid artificial divisions of the material based on either temporal progression or predetermined categorizations, I have attempted to cluster the artists and their paintings around selected shared themes and attributes. As the artists converse, in a sense, with each other, I will attempt to weave their narrative into my own journey of discovery, as a reminder of the inescapable bias of this research. The woven, or perhaps roughly felted structure of the interaction provides no sequence or order of priority, no point of arrival. Artists and their work are not classified by cultural background, genre, style or degree of notoriety, but are simply gathered together around the nucleus of a particular subject of discussion. These subjects, such as "the horizon," "the tree," "the

elevated perspective,” are not meant to comprise a complete set of characteristics. They are themes or approaches that have emerged as interesting focal points shared by several of the artists.

In Chapter One I will examine paintings that exhibit the geometry of the wheel or mandala, an archetypal structure associated in many of the world’s religious traditions with wholeness and healing. In Chapter Two I will look to the horizon, considering it as a limit of perception, and as such, a sign of extra-mundane levels of existence in a multilayered universe. Chapter Three is an examination of paintings that refer to the vertical axis, or axis mundi as well as those that make use of an elevated perspective, as though from a position on the vertical axis looking down at the earthly plane. Along the way, I hope to demonstrate that the sacred geometry exhibited in the paintings contributes to a sense of geopiety, a term originally suggested by the American geographer John Kirtland Wright to indicate the sense of reverence toward a particular place, a reverence that has historically been expressed as the presence of a god or spirit marked by a shrine or temple (Tuan 1976).

Now I ask the forgiveness of all parties whether mentioned or unmentioned and invite your compassion, curiosity and ultimately your criticism and contributions.

Greetings! I am Kim Ennis. I was born on the prairie, on Treaty Six land, and it is the only home I know. My father was born to prairie farmers and my mother was born to Mennonite peasants, conscientious objectors fleeing the violence of the Russian Revolution. I am a son of the prairie, an artist and a student of art and history. This is the story of my quest to gain a deeper understanding of the paintings made by prairie artists. It is a story of encounters with paintings and with those who made them. It begins at the center of the world . . .

Chapter One: Mandala

When we humans walk upon the prairie, or on any other part of the earth, we experience a space that is, for our purposes, approximately planar and intersected by a perpendicular gravitational vector. This set of spatial relationships is referred to as geometry, or “earth measurement,” for it is based on our phenomenal experience of terrestrial space. Physical movement through phenomenal space is, unsurprisingly, replicated in the pictorial form, resulting in a foundational correspondence between pictures and the earth, a correspondence not limited to the various traditional forms known as “landscape” painting, but transcending all genres and styles, indeed all cultural differences. It is the existential basis of picture making.

The skeletal foundation of painting, therefore, is a three-dimensional geometry consisting of the two dimensions of the picture plane and a perpendicular vector that corresponds to the relationship of the viewer to the picture. In traditional European painting, this relationship is expressed as an illusory pictorial depth that can be travelled in the imagination of the viewer, but in other traditions, in contemporary practice, and in the work of naïve artists, this may not be so. For example, modern painting, as Clement Greenberg observed, exhibits a marked tendency toward an opaque flatness, deliberately blocking the perpendicular movement through the picture plane; nevertheless, the axis remains, albeit in a terminated form that suggests a purposeful obstruction on the part of the painter and a resulting frustration for the viewer. In traditional Buddhist and Hindu paintings of mandalas, the cosmos is displayed as though viewed from above, locating the viewer within an elevated perspective, detached from the world. In this case, the perpendicular axis refers to a spiritual movement beyond the earthly plane, rather than a journey across or through it. In a similar fashion, in the rock paintings found on the Churchill River in northern Saskatchewan (Figure 2), the pictorial space is metaphysical rather than terrestrial, and the relationship of the viewer may be that of an interpreter of a cosmic map. Whatever the function or interpretation of the rock paintings, whether it is known to the viewer or not, there is a relationship that is established by the perpendicular vector, the line of sight. In some examples of naïve painting, such as that of Ann Harbuz

(see Figure 43) the perpendicular axis may refer to both pictorial depth and elevation, in a combined perspective that suggests a complex relationship.

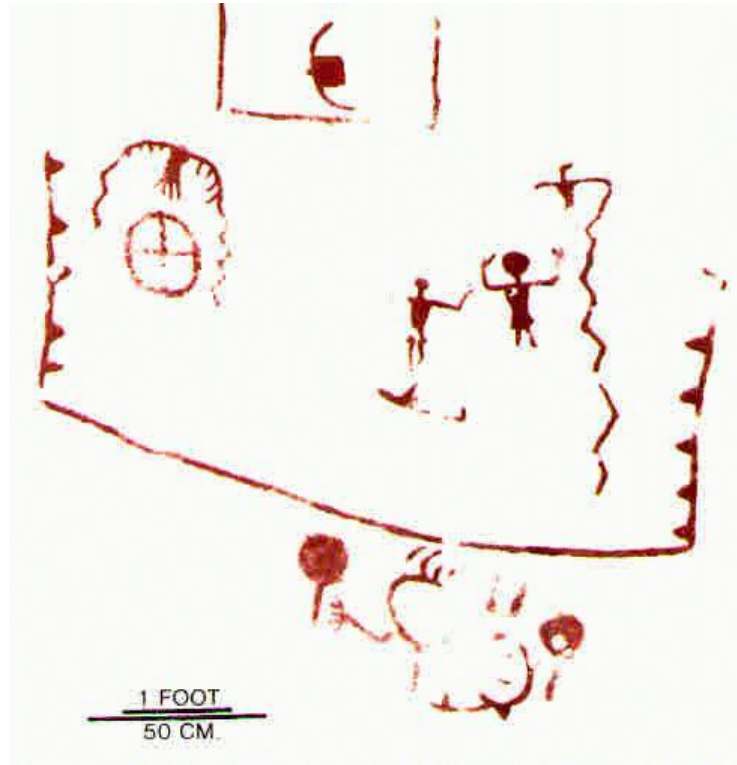


Figure 2 Rock Painting, High Rock Narrows, Site 2, Face VII
Canoe Saskatchewan

<http://canoesaskatchewan.rkc.ca/arch/rockart.htm>

Accessed March 17, 2012

Photograph by T.E.H. Jones

Reproduced by permission.

When I walk on the prairie, I feel not only the presence of great space, but also the presence of an overwhelming creative, organizing and sustaining power, a divine presence, a numinous beauty. The triaxial geometry is the juncture of the world's artistic and religious traditions through which this sense of wonder is expressed in prayers as well as in pictures. For example, in Indigenous philosophic systems, the physical and spiritual domains intersect along the axes of the four cardinal compass points and a vertical axis that both ascends above and descends below the earthly plane. One finds this idea expressed, for example, in *Black Elk Speaks*, in which the Lakota author begins his story by appealing to the “four quarters of the universe,” the Great Spirit and the Earth

Mother (Neihardt 1972, 2-5). The planar dimensions are similarly delineated in the Medicine Wheel of numerous Indigenous cultures of the plains (Storm 1972, 4-7) and in Buddhist and Hindu mandalas; the vertical axis may be represented by the smoke that rises from Black Elk's Sacred Pipe, the Tree at the center of the Garden in Hebrew cosmology, the totem pole of the Haida Gwaii, or the cathedral spire in Western Europe.

Elements of a sacred geometry are evident in extremely diverse examples of prairie painting. This suggests certain continuities: from traditional religious art, through modernism to contemporary practice; between First Nations and settlement cultures; between high art and folk art; between all styles and genres of prairie painting. Indeed, religion, art and ecology are aspects of an integral process of creation: an artist experiences an illumination, a whisper or a sign from the extra-mundane realm and marks the spot with an object; this becomes the locus of the sacred geometry and the sanctuary of a *numen*, a spirit of the place; the creative act has a radiating influence that tends to promote a reciprocal reliance and responsibility between the spirits of the land and the community of human inhabitants. As an underlying common structure, the tendency toward an expression of the sacred can be viewed as a unifying and healing force that bridges the chasm between cultures and restores art to its traditional place as a medium for communication between heaven and earth. My discussion of these works will bring them together without regard to standard art historical classifications of any kind, as a way of undermining existing hierarchies and emphasizing their common archetypal source.

The story begins, as I said, at the center of the world. In his elegant and comprehensive survey of the historically shifting attitudes toward European landscape painting, Malcolm Andrews includes a jewel-like poem by Wallace Stevens that exemplifies and illustrates the concept of the world center.

I placed a jar in Tennessee,
And round it was, upon a hill.
It made the slovenly wilderness
Surround that hill.

The wilderness rose up to it,
And sprawled around, no longer wild.
The jar was round upon the ground

And tall and of a port in air.

It took dominion everywhere.
The jar was gray and bare.
It did not give of bird or bush,
Like nothing else in Tennessee.

Wallace Stevens, 'Anecdote of the Jar,' *Harmonium*, 1923 in (Andrews 1999, 5)



Figure 3 Grant McConnell, *Athabasca Waters*, 2009

Acrylic on wood

87.6 x 59.7 cm

Reproduced by permission of the artist.

The jar is a talisman: its placement imposes an order and establishes a gravitational field that extends infinitely outward, affecting the entire cosmos. Its principle features are its roundness, its reflective surface and its “emptiness,” that is, its lifelessness in comparison with the fecund environment surrounding it, or perhaps its potential for engendering life. In any case, it has both a mysterious interior and a significantly reflective surface. The roundness of the vessel is suggestive of the pipe-bowl, the chalice or the sacred rattle, objects that stand at the center of the world in diverse religious traditions. The reflective,

mirror-like surface reveals the jar to be a work of art, like the poem itself, and like the paintings that we are about to discuss: they show us the world by imposing a set of ordering limitations such as selection, framing, emphasis, palette, and geometry. This order places the human viewer at the center with the world arrayed in all directions from the center—a radial symmetry. Ralph Waldo Emerson comments on this tendency toward roundness in his essay “Nature”:

The eye is the best of artists. By the mutual action of its structure and of the laws of light, perspective is produced, which integrates every mass of objects, of what character soever, into a well colored and shaded globe, so that where the particular objects are mean and unaffecting, the landscape which they compose is round and symmetrical. (Emerson 1982, 42)

It is the artist who places the jar, mediating seen and unseen forces, and striving for order and wholeness on behalf of the community through the realization of a visible paradigm of integration in which the distant is brought near, and what is outside is internalized and owned: the shamanic role of holy one, artist and healer.

Grant McConnell (1958–) is a Saskatoon artist, a settler descendant like myself, and instructor of Canadian art history at the University of Saskatchewan. His painting, *Athabasca Waters* (Figure 3) appears to me to be almost a visual counterpart to the poem. The roundness seems to draw the entire world into itself, or perhaps to be the source of it, like the sun, both holding all things in a gravitational embrace, and bathing them in a continual radiance. McConnell’s jar has a peculiar radiance that lends an almost supernatural aura to the object or a divine presence, a manifestation of the sacred. McConnell explains the origin of the painting:

Athabasca Waters was done in a series of still-life works where I imagined the water taken from specific rivers and lakes influencing the growth of what is seen in the vessel. The Athabasca River, ... the land around it is quite dark, brooding, northern. This is the spirit of the place that I wanted to convey. It was done for an exhibition entitled *River Gods*, ... wherein the idea of the “gods” and a loose mythology was applied to the landscape here. (McConnell 2010, 13)

The painting presents a perfect bilateral symmetry with a precise geometric center located at the upper lip of the jar, the apparent source of the emanation of light. There is a dark reflection in McConnell’s jar that has an almost angelic appearance, and a rising plume of

smoky light that suggests the genie rising from the bottle. Perhaps these are life-giving waters, or healing waters, but in any case, there is no longer chaos in this world: the jar takes “dominion everywhere.”

McConnell’s paintings are most often allegorical, speaking of particular incidents from the past, retelling them in surprising ways, as a good storyteller does, to slip past our mental defenses. As in a number of McConnell’s paintings the setting is an opening in the boreal forest made by the river of the title, leading us on a passage through the darkness. We are confronted with the iconic apparition of the jar blocking our passage, as though delivering a warning message. Does the empty jar refer to the purity of the original creation, to its sanctity? Or is it a symbol of the possibilities still open to us at this critical juncture? The ominous messenger in this striking painting, a river god, holds up an image of our impact on the broader environment, not from a technical or management perspective, but from a spiritual one. By making of the threat to the Athabasca watershed a particular example of a general ecological issue, McConnell brings it home: the painting forces us to reconsider the implications of human industrial activities in general and the extraction of the tar sands in particular; the confrontation takes place at the center of the world, where the viewer resides, where all actions originate.

A significant number of McConnell’s paintings exhibit this iconic symmetry. Many are vases with or without flowers. His 2007 series of paintings of hot air balloons contain little else apart from the essential characteristics of the centralizing figure. Even the more elaborate narratives are frequently organized around a bilateral symmetry, as in *Bent Straight* (Figure 31). This insistence on a structural center combined with the specific, local nature of the narrative content result in a highly charged sacred object that emanates a powerful sense of geopiety, the value that one places on one’s own neighbourhood, one’s own land.

The tendency to create an ordering structure around a central point finds its ultimate expression in the mandala and the Medicine Wheel. Hyemeyohsts Storm describes the Medicine Wheel in detail in his controversial but extraordinarily beautiful

book, *Seven Arrows*. He explains how it can be a teaching tool that models the relationships between all living things, as well as a lens through which to view the world.

In many ways this Circle, the Medicine Wheel, can best be understood if you think of it as a mirror in which everything is reflected. ‘The Universe is the Mirror of the People,’ the old Teachers tell us, ‘and each person is a Mirror to every other person.’ ... All things are contained within the Medicine Wheel, and all things are equal within it. The Medicine Wheel is the total Universe. (Storm 1972, 4-5)

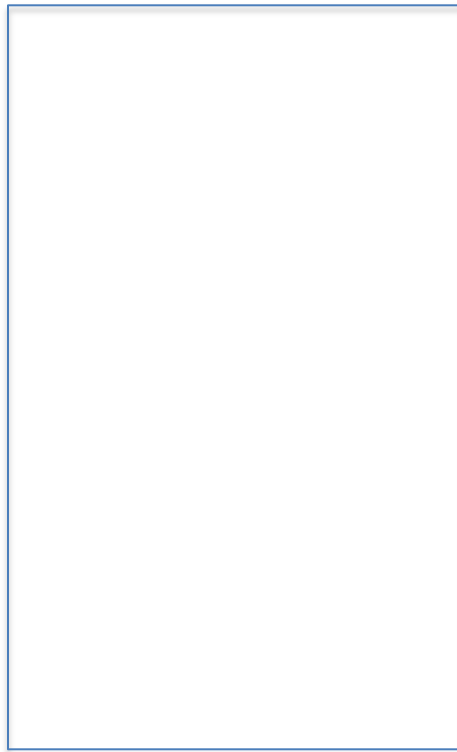


Figure 4 Blackfoot (Piegan?) envelope, ca. 1865

Buffalo rawhide, pigment

69.8 x 40.6 cm

National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution

Removed due to copyright restrictions. Excellent examples of painted parfleches are available in the original source: Torrence, Gaylord. *The American Indian Parfleche: A Tradition of Abstract Painting*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994.

This reflective aspect of the Wheel bears a resemblance to the jar on the hill in Tennessee, and to McConnell’s vessel, as well as to the mandala: all bring the entire cosmos into focus at a single point of awareness. The mandala is the “wheel,” or “circle,” a radially symmetrical pattern of the same basic plan as the Medicine Wheel or the rosette window in European cathedrals. The test pattern in Figure 1 is an example of an

analogous profane interpretation from North American popular culture. It establishes a center from which radiate a specific number of divisions, usually beginning with the four cardinal points. As such, it is a kind of map of the cosmos, which, in the most elaborate cases, for example in Tibetan Buddhist sand paintings and thangkas, delineates numerous levels of existence and forces that govern them.

The mandala is a circular design of many colours and great geometrical complexity. Essentially it is a symbolic map of a world; the world of the human mind and consciousness. The various circles and squares composing it represent the various stages of psychic development on the long journey from ignorance to ultimate enlightenment. The final stage is arrived at in the centre of the circle, in which resides a Buddha or Bodhisattva who represents the final goal of the spiritual quest. (Norbu 1999, 176)

Bob Boyer (1948–2004) developed a very personal visual language based on the mandala or Medicine Wheel over the course of his long and fruitful career as a painter, teacher and pow-wow dancer. His abstract paintings began around 1980 with an exploration of shield designs that “incorporate geometric motifs such as triangles, pyramids and arrows derived from traditional Northern Plains designs” (Martin 2008, 27). However, Boyer quickly abandoned the shield motif because he felt that it was not authentically his, or rather, perhaps, that he was not of its time: it was borrowed from the past (Martin 2008, 25). Oddly, he found his authentic voice through an examination of the painted parfleche (see Figure 4), a richly abundant prairie painting tradition (done exclusively by women) that would seem to be equally distant in time, yet Boyer found in the bold geometry, bright colors and symmetry a structural framework that suited his personal quest.

The resulting series of discoveries continued to influence his paintings for much of his remaining life, but Boyer did not merely repeat previously executed designs. On the contrary, he freely reinterpreted and improvised on the traditional themes, in the manner of an extemporizing modern jazz artist. Lee-Ann Martin echoes the words of Gaylord Torrence (who compiled the authoritative study on the American Indian parfleche) in her magnificent catalogue of Boyer’s life’s work:

There was no fixed, universally-recognized symbolism that existed in parfleche painting; rather, there was great variation based on cultural tradition and

individual preference. In fact, the same motifs could be used by numerous artists to express a variety of ideas. Boyer's translation of the formal elements of traditional Plains Indian symbols into his own personal terms is fully consistent with this culture-specific artistic tradition. (Martin 2008, 29)

Since openness to the adoption of new ideas and techniques is inherent in the Plains First Nations tradition, Boyer's innovations are true to that tradition and indeed extend it into the present. These are the two sides of tradition and innovation: one depends on the other, such that no tradition could exist without periodic innovations, and no innovation would be possible without a traditional basis. His shift to a more personal, hence more modern language is an innovation that contributes to the parfleche tradition, incorporating modernist painting tendencies, such as the very loose application, with symbolic content gleaned from his extensive travels throughout North America, China and Scandinavia.

As Boyer himself implies, modern North American abstraction is itself indebted to the parfleche paintings, among other Indigenous designs, as one of its original sources. These paintings were among the most abundant artifacts on the plains at the beginning of settlement, and therefore almost certainly a significant influence on subsequent North American art. Boyer's friend and colleague, David Garneau, said that, "Boyer found in their [parfleche paintings] bold colours and formal beauty not only a complement to the non-objective painting he had learned at university, but also a precursor, even an influence, on that tradition" (Garneau, Bob Boyer 2009, 113). Boyer said of this connection:

I consider myself an abstract painter using a very ancient Northern Plains tradition of abstraction that modern artists dipped into and copied. So the history of this is older than modern abstraction. Where I'm coming from is more deeply rooted. (Martin 2008, 60)

He was aware of his pivotal role as a cultural bridge, as a Metis Cree, poised between a traditional First Nations practice, and a global contemporary culture. Garneau continues:

As a spiritual man in a primarily secular setting, a Metis who joined the First Nations pow-wow circuit, and as a hog-riding, t-shirt wearing guy who also ran a university department and sat on numerous boards, Bob often found himself a mediator between worlds. (Garneau, Bob Boyer 2009, 114)

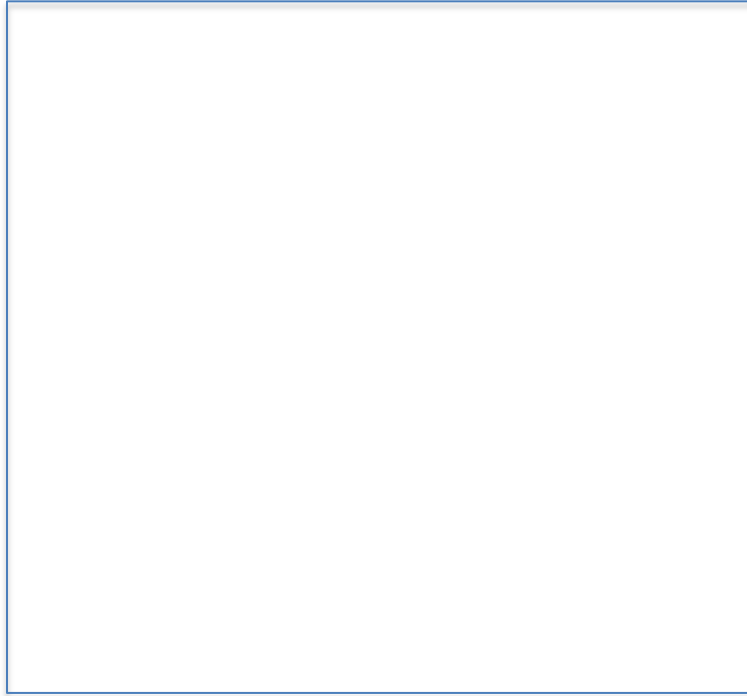


Figure 5 Bob Boyer, *Imagio Pietatis–A New Wave for Ozone*, 1990

Oil, acrylic, graphite, chalk pastel on blanket

229.5 x 249 cm

Collection of the Mendel Art Gallery

Removed due to copyright restrictions. Excellent images of Boyer's paintings can be found in the original source: Martin, Lee-Ann. *Bob Boyer: His Life's Work*. Regina: MacKenzie Art Gallery, 2008.

The roots may be almost as wide as they are deep, for the timeless symmetrical structure that is the basis of the parfleche paintings appears in virtually every culture as one of the most significant of Carl Jung's archetypes of the collective unconscious, the "archetype of wholeness" as he calls it in his essay "Concerning Mandala Symbolism." The radial symmetry of the parfleches, and of Boyer's paintings (see Figure 5) originates at the center, emerges from it, magnifies and encompasses it. Jung equates this necessity to locate the center as a requirement of psychic wholeness:

There are innumerable variants ...but they are all based on the squaring of a circle. Their basic motif is the premonition of a center of personality, a kind of central point within the psyche, to which everything is related, by which everything is arranged, and which is itself a source of energy. The energy of the central point is manifested in the almost irresistible compulsion and urge to become what one is, just as every organism is driven to assume the form that is characteristic of its nature, no matter what the circumstances. (Jung 1959, 357)



Figure 6 Bob Boyer, *Grandfather Will Come Again*, 1987
Oil over acrylic, with pastel and charcoal on blanket
231.4 x 192 cm

Collection of the Mendel Art Gallery

Removed due to copyright restrictions. Excellent images of Boyer's paintings can be found in the original source: Martin, Lee-Ann. *Bob Boyer: His Life's Work*. Regina: MacKenzie Art Gallery, 2008.

The superimposition of the square and circle recurs in various forms in numerous examples of prairie painting. As in the parfleche painting and in Boyer's blanket paintings, they are first bounded by a square frame, and then divided radially into quadrants, as in the scheme of the Medicine Wheel, the symbol of wholeness and healing. As Jung suggests, the tendency to mark significant junctures by means of a wheel-like symmetry radiating from a central point is archetypal, that is, occurring spontaneously and universally in human creativity. It appears not only in traditional work such as the First Nations parfleche paintings and settlers' quilt designs, but in the work of naïve painters such as McCargar (Figure 8), modern painters, most notably Arthur McKay and Ronald Bloore, and young contemporary artists such as Wally Dion (see Figure 45; Figure 46). While not always overt, the frequent recurrence of the mandala motif suggests that there is a common experience expressed through painting, an experience of the numinous that is not restricted by culture, class or education.

Many of Bob Boyer's paintings exhibit these qualities, although in some cases the tradition has been "renovated," a word that MacKenzie Gallery curator Timothy Long used in our interview to describe contemporary innovations to the prairie painting tradition in general. For example, in *Grandfather Will Come Again* (Figure 6) he has partially sacrificed the circular aspect for other considerations, but retained the division into quadrants as well as some remnants of radial symmetry. Even the bilateral symmetry is imperfect, exhibiting idiosyncratic eccentricities, small differences from one side to the other, a deliberate loosening of the execution. More significantly, he has also added predellas that result from the opening out, or unfolding, of the parfleche. This unfolding, which is particularly apparent in *Grandfather Will Come Again*, allows Boyer to present multiple views, or views from multiple perspectives in a single painting. Lee-Ann Martin observes:

The parfleche form now becomes a compositional device within which multiple perspectives of an environment are possible. These are among the first paintings in which the theme of place or "cosmic landscape" would emerge. Thus, physical structures such as mountains and tipis, for example, could be presented horizontally or from an aerial view directly above the land – among other possibilities – in the upper canvas. The lower third often represents the ambiguous space that exists between Heaven and Earth. (Martin 2008, 30-3)



Figure 7 Grand Avenue, looking South, Indian Head, Sask. 191-?
Postcard

University of Saskatchewan Library, Special Collections, Pamphlet Collection, LXX-1223 with permission.

Martin hints in this passage at the personal symbolism that Boyer is beginning to insert at this stage: the mountains, tipis, horses and trees that begin to populate his worldviews. The stepped pyramid motif, for example, seems to be imported from another, perhaps Mayan or Aztec culture. The particular significance of these figures is not readily decipherable, as Martin has already pointed out, but the overall picture is clearly a kind of cosmic map, similar in a number of ways to the structure of the Tibetan mandala, with a center (in this case square), an “inner courtyard” of walled-in rectangular areas arrayed in the form of a cross, all circumscribed, in this case, by an arch rather than a complete circle, and framed by an outer boundary of pyramidal mountains that suggest the horizon or the edge of the world.

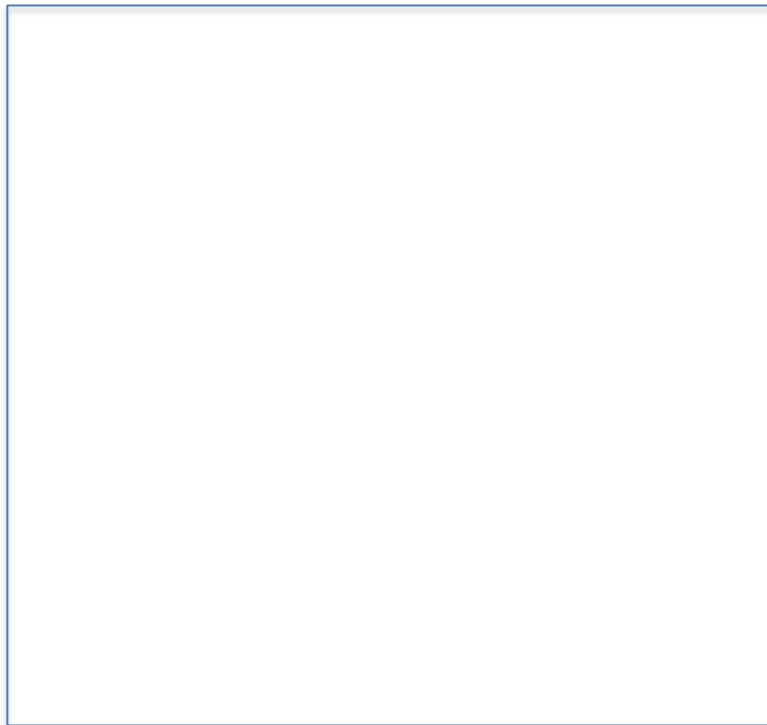


Figure 8 W.C. McCargar, *Sun's Glorious Set*, 1964
Oil, pastel, ink, graphite, glitter on masonite
56.8 x 71.5 cm
Collection of the Saskatchewan Arts Board
Removed due to copyright restrictions.

A very different example of radial geometry is to be found in the work of numerous prairie landscape painters who employ a single-point perspective to create an

illusory pictorial depth. This conventional depiction of the prairie by Euro-Canadian artists likely derives in part from postcard imagery of the settlement era. There is a significant category of these postcards, which enjoyed a phenomenal popularity from about 1890 to 1930, consisting of views of Main Street in one or another of the newly established towns (Figure 7). The intention of the postcards of this era was to propagate the image of the prairies as already settled, secure and prosperous, and to this end, the typical view of Main Street showed a row of new buildings facing each other across a street leading away from the viewer toward a distant horizon. The unavoidable single-point perspective that resulted became a signifier of progress and a hopeful future as well as a chart of residency. This choice of viewpoint was also applied to the new railways and the grain elevators and flourmills that were constructed alongside them, resulting in similar examples of the single-point geometry. Later, as landscape painters began to document the farmland and countryside, the rural roads and lines of fence-posts or telegraph poles replicated the geometry.

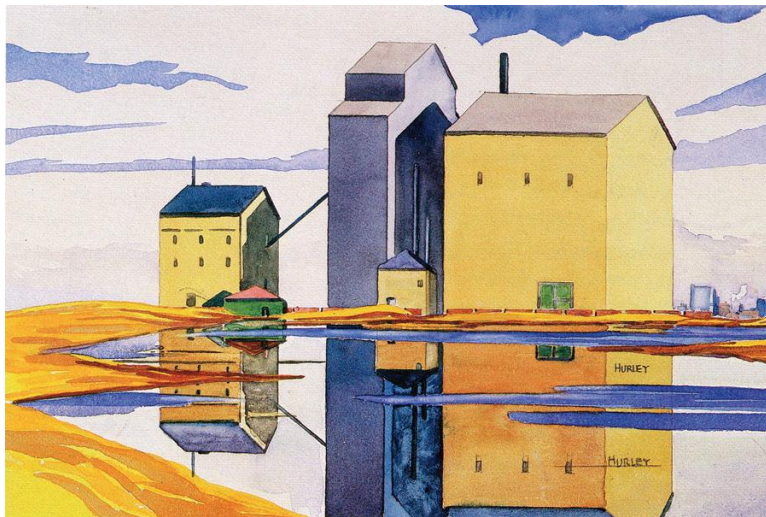


Figure 9 Robert Hurley, *Spring Reflections*, ca. 1945
Watercolour on card
24.5 x 37.2 cm
Collection of D.K. Pragnell, Lethbridge
Reproduced by permission of Douglas & McIntyre, Vancouver.

While these roads are in fact arranged according to an imposed rectangular grid that has become associated with the prairies, their pictorial depiction conforms to a radial

geometry that converges at a single point, or radiates from it, and as such, can be interpreted as another example of the mandala. This is particularly clear in the extraordinary paintings of the unschooled artist, W.C. McCargar (1906-1980), especially in the untitled work shown in Figure 8, in which a funnel-shaped cloud repeats the triangular shape of the receding railway tracks to complete the mandala form. In fact, if you view the painting as a set of flat geometric shapes independent of the spatial illusion, it is remarkably similar to Boyer's paintings or to many of the *parfleches*. In any case, the painting exhibits almost perfect radial symmetry, serving, like any mandala, as a focal point, a centering force.

One of the artists responsible for the translation of the postcard imagery into landscape painting was the English immigrant, Robert Hurley (1894–1980). Although Terry Fenton calls him the “first genuine painter of the prairies” he must mean that he is the originator or penultimate author of this genre (T. Fenton, Jan Wyers, Robert N. Hurley: *An Exhibition of Two Prairie Painters* c.1971). Even if there were numerous contributors, it was Hurley, without a doubt, who propelled the now-familiar prairie landscape convention to its extraordinary level of popularity through the production and sale of literally thousands of examples.

Most of these paintings were executed while Hurley lived with his wife Isabella and their two children in Sutherland, which was at that time a town separate from the city of Saskatoon. He had a job as an assistant in the Plant Pathology Laboratory at the University of Saskatchewan, walking or riding the bus the short distance each day. On the way he “memorized” landscapes, later recording them as sketches for later use. Jean Swanson, who wrote the authoritative work on Hurley, cites excerpts from his diary:

Did four pencil sketches of buildings reflected in pools of snow water. I love doing these. ... Glorious day. Wandered around Sutherland. Six pencil sketches of elevators reflected in water pools. ... Seven sketches of snow water lakes, and reflected buildings which always make for pictorial inspiration. (Swanson 1973, 69-70)

He could even sketch and paint from the windows of his house, for his subject surrounded him, and inspiration was everywhere, whether in the water collected in the ditches, the frost on the windows or the glow of the sunrise. His habitual routine was to

rise very early, light a fire in the wood stove, say his morning prayers, then look around the neighbourhood for things to sketch (Swanson 1973, 70).

Hurley was a profoundly religious man. Swanson describes very well the attitude of an artist who is motivated by the urgings of the spirit:

If he is as fervent a believer as Mr. Hurley, his religious convictions permeate everything he does and all that he thinks and feels. As an artist, Hurley is not only expressing his faith in a Divine Guiding Power, but he is also serving his God by witnessing to the wonders he has created. His painting is a form of prayer. (Swanson 1973, 37)

Hurley's hikes along the river or the railway track are for him a form of worship, and his sketches and paintings are prayers. Thus, Hurley's paintings, as celebrations of the numinous in his immediate surroundings, are expressions of geopiety. As such, they are no longer specifically about grain elevators or railway tracks, but about the immanence of the spirit within these and all other physical forms.

In this sense, Hurley's paintings are very closely related to the parfleches painted by the unnamed women of the same prairie. What is perhaps even more surprising is that they are also related formally. In Figure 9 we see the familiar grain elevators reflected in pools of water. The reflected image creates a horizontal symmetry that is matched by an approximate vertical symmetry in the arrangement of the pictorial components. Not only the structures of the buildings, but even the designations of the earth and clouds are strikingly geometric, creating an array of triangles and rectangles that dominate the composition. Moreover, each of the delineated areas is painted with a flat, unmodulated, brilliant hue that suggests an overriding interest in formal concerns at the expense of a naturalistic similitude. Hurley's painting is, like Boyer's, and like the parfleche artists, a personal renewal of a previous painting tradition, an innovation in sacred geometry and a geopious offering.

Many prairie paintings do not, of course, exhibit a radial symmetry but the conditions of their creation and the effect on the viewer suggest that they function in much the same way as the mandala or the Medicine Wheel, as tools for directing and transforming awareness. The picture plane displays a section of the cosmos, a micro-cosmos that is both a record of the painter's state of mind and a membranous filter that

allows selective access to a realm beyond or behind the apparent scene. This permeable aspect is analogous to the suggestion of the mysterious contents of the jar as opposed to either its centrality or its reflectivity. A number of modern and contemporary prairie painters make use of some variation of this geometry to mark and thereby sanctify a particular site, invoking the numina of the places that are dear to them.



Figure 10 Clint Hunker, *Poplars and Pasture, Naples Clouds*, 2010
Pastel on linen paper
45.7 x 61 cm
Reproduced by permission of the artist.

Clint Hunker (1954–) is a studio instructor at the University of Saskatchewan and a painter of the prairies. We attended high school together, although as he was two years ahead of me, we did not associate. Now we share an office in the Murray Building where he teaches painting and drawing. In our interview he made specific mention of the mandala to describe the function of his finished paintings, as a *yantra*, or instrument of contemplation. In his own experience as an artist, he enters a state of meditation in the midst of the land, like the poet placing the jar. I once accompanied him on a painting excursion to Smuts, not far from Saskatoon, where he knows the back roads, gravel pits, sloughs and gullies well. He carefully selects his vantage point, perhaps seeing no more than a fascinating change in the color of the weeds across a frozen pond, then settles in for a long, silent engagement, often with pastels, as in *Poplars and Pasture, Naples*

Clouds (see Figure 10). He has told me that he tries to allow the sensations of light to find their way directly from the land to the canvas without his intervention, a kind of self-effacing meditative act.

I'd almost say that the looking around is almost more spiritual than the actual doing. The looking around sometimes can be very, very moving, you know. And then when you finally settle in that spot, then the process just takes over and you gotta trust the process from beginning to end, whether it's bad or it's good. You've just got to go through it. (Hunker 2010, 7)

Just as the contemplation of the mandala, in eastern cultures, acts as a point of entry for a meditative state, gazing at the land serves this purpose for Hunker, and quite possibly for others. While he emphasizes the desire to transmit the impressions "uninflected," this is an unattainable objective, as all seeing is the result of an imposed mental order, or as Nelson Goodman aptly notes, "The making of a picture commonly participates in making what is to be pictured" (Goodman 1976, 32). What Hunker does succeed in attaining is a remarkable recording of the contemplative state behind the creation of the picture, an almost contagious tranquility that is nevertheless highly energized. George Moppett writes:

Imbuing nature with a metaphysical current, Hunker transfigures the sights, sounds and atmosphere of his surroundings into tightly woven compositions of intricately detailed design that carry with them an air of mystery and solitude. The sense of privacy that emanates from these pastels and paintings stems from a reverence for nature, not as a permanent environment in which to live and work but rather as a place of renewal.... His vision is not one of a fixed reality but rather of perpetual creation, a world filtered by sensory perceptions. (Moppett, Clint Hunker: Paintings and Pastels 1989-91 1991)

It was during my interview with Hunker that he introduced me to the term "geopieté" as a way of naming this intent to express reverence for the greater environment through the focused personal experience of the particular place. Although the term has a long provenance, Hunker learned of it from Saskatoon author, David Carpenter, who applied it to certain examples of Canadian literature.

The term 'geopieté' derives from an ancient and sometimes primitive world in which ancestor worship and fertility cults were considered normal, in which a sense of awe was felt for a deity who demanded propitiatory rites. Such rites were reciprocal. While the worshippers needed to venerate their gods or their ancestors

with sacrifices, the ancestral gods needed this propitiation as a demonstration of loyalty.... In modern times, these gods have receded and nature has lost her (or should one say its) capital N. But something of this filial piety, this reciprocity between god and worshipper, remains. For as Yi-Fu Tuan and many other scientifically-grounded scholars remind us, reciprocity lies at the core of intelligent ecology. We can expect to get from the land only what we put into it. To destroy anything in our natural environment is to destroy a part of ourselves. (Carpenter 1985, 111)

Hunker is keenly aware of the ecological crisis that faces all humans at this time, and considers his paintings, as I do, to be instruments of change. His example is to offer, at the very least, respectful attention to the natural world.



Figure 11 Lorna Russell, *Dogwood Valley, Near Alvena*, 1990

Oil on canvas

71.1 x 91.4 cm

Reproduced by permission of the artist.

When I asked him about the implications of ownership that are sometimes associated with landscape painting he responded with a different interpretation of ownership:

Georgia O'Keefe said she owned those hills ...I think of it as more of a partnership between those hills and the artist. So, to me, owning those hills means that I would know a lot about them and I would have studied them for a long time ... different weather conditions, the whole thing. ... geopiety is the love of the

place that you're in but it's also that the place that you're in absorbs you and you become one with it. So you can't own something that you're absorbed into, right? (Hunker 2010, 1)

Geopiety, then, implies a mutuality that excludes the possibility of domination, as well as an acute awareness of the value of a particular place with all its attributes.

Lorna Russell (1933–) is another Saskatoon painter whose work could be described in very similar terms: she returns regularly to specific favoured locations just outside the city or at Anglin Lake; she gives equal treatment to all components of her composition; her views are apparently random cross-sections of the world; and the picture plane functions as a partially transparent membrane (see Figure 11). George Moppett, former curator at the Mendel Art Gallery, expresses this set of relationships very eloquently in his essay for Russell's 1983 exhibition of drawings, and it is equally true for the paintings:

Everything in the drawing is shown in exact detail and carries the same weight, the same importance. There is no hierarchy of elements, only the feeling that even the smallest, seemingly insignificant thing is a revelation. Russell's view is very much a cosmic one that proffers a very precise sense of the world order and which acknowledges the awe-inspiring grandeur of nature. (Moppett, Lorna Russell: Drawings 1980-1983 1983, 4)

Russell has maintained a lifelong landscape painting practice in Saskatoon, although she "assiduously avoided" the Emma Lake Workshops out of a preference for working alone as well as a stubborn determination to remain independent of institutional influences (Russell 2010, 6). Carol Williams, in a rare catalogue essay, ascribes "spiritual values" to Russell's work in contrast to more successful artists who attracted attention through urban associations or modernist tendencies (Williams 1996). Russell describes her need to know a place well before successfully painting it, and her lifelong habit of rooting herself in a particular location for periods of years at a time for this purpose:

I was lucky enough to have a little place on somebody's land. So that whole area, right outside of Langham was an absolutely beautiful place! They let me build a little cabin on it. So I was there about 20 years, off and on. First they had a bed and breakfast. I was there. And then I asked if I could put a trailer there, so I had a little trailer studio, and then they let me build this little cabin. And because the place itself sort of grew in importance and beauty, then I was able to do stronger

work in the places that I really knew.... Because I've never been able to stop at a place I haven't been before and do a good painting. I can do something, but the ones where I really know the area and feel something about them, I do much better. (Russell 2010, 22-3)

Once again we find the geopious attitude at the heart of Russell's practice, and a focused yet detached contemplation that bears comparison to the mental state needed for the construction of a mandala or the writing of an icon.

Although many years younger, Clint Hunker often works alongside Russell, making an annual pilgrimage to Anglin Lake with her. He has the greatest admiration for Russell's work, speaking of her often, and clearly making use of some of the same emphases in his pastel drawings and oil paintings. They both share with a number of prairie landscape painters, including Ernest Lindner, Reta Cowley and Dorothy Knowles a preference for a cross-sectional view evenly dispersed in a semi-transparent membrane.



Figure 12 Ernest Lindner, *Puff Balls*, 1971
Watercolour on paper
53.8 x 74.6 cm
Private Collection, Winnipeg
Reproduced by permission of Degen Lindner.

Last summer I revisited Fairy Isle, once the summer home of Ernest Lindner (1897–1988) and his young wife, Bodil. The island is in the northernmost and wildest of the three Emma Lakes, a short paddle from the Emma Lake Art School, now called the

Kenderdine Campus. I have been there several times before, but on this occasion I had a particularly powerful experience that made a lasting impression on me. As I took one photograph after another, finding in every upturned, broken stump, each shining clump of moss, every view of the white caps crossing the bay, a compelling and seemingly limitless source of beauty, it became obvious to me that Lindner, by moving to this remote location, did not turn away from the world: he turned toward magic. On Fairy Isle I could understand how an artist could spend a lifetime finding inspirational subject matter on a tiny piece of earth. The more closely you look at it, the more important it becomes, and the more significant the truths that it evokes. The subject does not grow old, it just gets clearer. It can never become tiresome to restate the glory of creation.

Although Lindner was deeply embedded in the organic, the “slovenly wilderness,” and possessed a powerfully clear eye from which no scrap of debris could escape notice, yet that eye is the jar, the center that cannot help finding order and taking “dominion everywhere.” *Puff Balls* (Figure 12) is an example of a view that ought to be chaotic, a view like every other view on Fairy Isle. It is the naked truth about decay, death eating, and life mercilessly penetrating life, but this painting has the sense of the sublime. Once you have seen Lindner’s paintings, all such views take on sublimity; once you have seen his painting of giant reed grass, all giant reed grass belongs to Ernie, as he was affectionately known by friends and students alike, taking on new significance through his vision. It is the sense of being at the center of all things conveyed by the almost lens-like dispersion of elements within this shallow proscenium space, as though some invisible magnetic force is influencing the placement of every fungus and leaf around an organizing center: the dark opening in the rotting trunk is almost like the circle of the mandala, the radial burst of sarsaparilla leaves almost at the intersection of two perpendicular axes of symmetry; the puffballs form most of a concentric ring around this; and the four corners are consigned to the bearberry. The shallow space contributes to the iconographic effect, as does the reference to death, the macrocosm and a transcendent order.

Lindner grew up in a suffocating, oppressive family environment caused mainly by his father’s adherence to an unusually strict fundamentalist Protestant sect. While everything about his character and his flight to the farthest corners of the North American

wilderness suggest his utter rejection of these values, and although he never embraced another religion, nevertheless there are many indications that his diverse interests included religious and spiritual questions. His daughter, Degen, a painter and teacher like her father, confirmed in our interview that he had an abiding interest in Buddhism. She also mentioned that he had a warm and lasting friendship with Otto Rogers, which suggests that he must have had more than a passing awareness of the Bahá'í faith. Lindner was keenly interested in recent discoveries in science as well as current philosophical notions, which he enthusiastically expounded upon during his Saturday Nights. These informal gatherings of artists in his home, which were for many years a cultural seedbed in Saskatoon, Lindner considered his most important contribution. George Moppett summarizes and contextualizes some of his interests:

Rather than a hierarchy of specificity, he believed in a wholeness, a relatedness of all life forms. This pantheistical view places Lindner within the context of developments in literature, music and painting, beginning in the late nineteenth century, which saw an accommodation of science with mysticism. Eastern doctrines, Theosophy and the writings of the American transcendentalists, Walt Whitman, Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson were of interest to the intellectual community of the 1920s and 30s, and Lindner himself acknowledged an interest in eastern philosophy and Buddhism. (Moppett, Ernest Lindner: Regeneration 1995, 3)

Lindner had a valued relationship with Lawren Harris, who came to visit him on more than one occasion in Saskatoon, and in whom he “recognized a kindred spirit, one interested in occultism, theosophy and Eastern religions” (Heath, *Uprooted: The Life and Art of Ernest Lindner* 1983, 92) Lindner was so impressed with Harris’s work that he briefly tried, rather unsuccessfully, to emulate it before returning to his own equally authentic expression of the mystery before him. Indeed, Lindner’s biographer, Terrence Heath, characterizes the time on Fairy Isle as a kind of mystical encounter:

In these years from 1935-46, Ernie and Bodil travelled the 150 miles north to their Fairy Isle at every opportunity both summer and winter. Friends often accompanied them and they hiked and canoed, painted and sketched and developed this isle of almost mythic proportions with its enchanted places, its places for meditation and its secret landscapes of marshes and groves. Ernie and Bodil looked on their surroundings in an animistic way which endowed the flora and fauna with spiritual life. Living on the island became a religious experience,

with art as its ritualistic language. (Heath, *Uprooted: The Life and Art of Ernest Lindner* 1983, 69)

Lindner's eclectic belief system centered on reincarnation and the continuation of life through endless cycles. As he said:

And when I am finished in this life—I shall continue in my next incarnation from where I have left off.... My close association with untouched nature on my island has particularly strengthened my belief in a continuity of life, death being only another form of life. Only forms change, life does not" (Heath, *Uprooted: The Life and Art of Ernest Lindner* 1983, 102).

The magical places of Fairy Isle inform his philosophy and his art. It is Lindner's geopiety, his absolute reverence for the place where he lives and the spirits that abide there, that lend authority and force to his images. The paintings become virtual hymns to the reciprocal cycles of nature, and due to the sense of "wholeness" and "relatedness" that Moppett refers to, invitations to a new ecocentrism.

Reta Cowley (1910–2004) and Dorothy Knowles (1927–) became lifelong friends at Emma Lake where Lindner had a more or less permanent presence. Knowles's daughter, Cathy, a very capable painter herself, remembers Ernie, "sitting on the dock at Emma Lake ... sort of meditating. He was quite a character, smoking his pipe and wearing his buckskin jacket" (Knowles 2010, 15). Although neither Knowles nor Cowley studied formally with him, his influence must have been inescapable for them, as it was for more than a generation of prairie artists. Knowles speculated during our interview on a remarkable chain of influence:

I was reading about Tom Forrestall who is an artist from Nova Scotia. Ernie taught Ted Pulford in Saskatoon. Ted Pulford went to Nova Scotia and he taught Tom Forrestall at Mount Allison University. ... But anyway, through this Pullford, I think Ernie had a big influence in Nova Scotia. And you look up my son in law-- do you know Cathy's husband? Graham [Fowler]. Do you know his work? ... Well, you can see Ernie's influence in Graham's work! And how that worked, from this Pullford to Nova Scotia and back... I thought that was so interesting! (Knowles 2010, 6)

Graham Fowler was one of my painting instructors; now, as a teacher, I propagate the web of tradition by telling my own students about the importance of Lindner's contributions.



Figure 13 Reta Cowley, *Untitled (green foliage, orange spots)*, ca. 1957

Oil on masonite

25.4 x 30.5 cm

Reproduced by permission of Mrs. Gaye Leslie.

All of them, the senior Lindner included, were powerfully influenced by the visiting artists at the Workshops. The outcome for Cowley and Knowles, perhaps surprisingly, considering that virtually all the visiting artists were non-representational painters, was a renewed commitment to their preferred subject of the local environment surrounding their two bases of operation, Emma Lake and Saskatoon. In Knowles's case this was certainly due to the benevolent intervention of Clement Greenberg who urged her to continue with her landscape painting rather than her recent efforts at abstraction. It is interesting to note that Greenberg, one of the most influential of all the guests at the Workshops, in spite of allegations of both sexism and elitism, was cited by many of the artists I interviewed, including Knowles and a number of other women, as their favourite source of criticism, a dear friend and a welcome guest in their studios. Marianne Watchel,

an Edmonton painter who studied at the University of Saskatchewan and at Emma Lake, met Greenberg many times and said that she valued his criticism over anyone else's and found him gentle, direct, confident and declarative.

Roald Nasgaard makes note of this in his *Abstract Painting in Canada*, and quotes an article by John Bentley Mays from *Toronto Globe and Mail*:

The real reason Greenberg is revered in these parts is not because he was a great thinker or a shrewd shaper of careers ... but because, on his repeated visits to Saskatchewan, he has been very kind. Several artists told me that, while eastern critics ignored developments in the Prairies, Greenberg was right there, encouraging, parenting, and pushing artists to do better. That may come as a shock to readers used to Greenberg's tirades and pompous edicts, yet I found no reason to doubt it happened, and still happens. (Nasgaard 2007, 163)

Although the term "parenting" may be slightly demeaning to the artists, Mays's comments echo what I heard in interviews and confirm the positive impact that Greenberg had for many.

Dorothy Knowles, in addition to raising three daughters, has sustained a consistently successful career as one of western Canada's best-known landscape painters. Reta Cowley was her inspiration from their first meeting at Emma Lake:

Well, I first went to that art school, in '48, I think it was. I went up for the summer with Reta Cowley. ... I thought it was probably the most wonderful time of my life, in a way, just growing up in the '30s and '40s, the depression, and there was no money to go anywhere, and I'd never been to the woods. And just to be up in the North and the woods, and discover I could paint. (Knowles 2010, 8)

Much later, around 1969, both Knowles and Cowley were teaching night classes at the University of Saskatchewan:

We would sometimes plan classes together, and we were studying drawing ourselves. I think it was the best course I ever took, because I'd never done any teaching, and so I have that set of drawing books I bought, and I studied them and I would get lessons out of them and discuss it with Reta, and then we'd say how it worked, and so we had quite a nice time working back and forth. ... We didn't teach together, but we each were teaching drawing, so we'd work out classes and what we thought would work. So it was, as I say, it was the best course I ever taught and took! Because we worked this all out ahead of time, and so I learned a lot about drawing! (Knowles 2010, 5)

Both painters dedicated their work to the persistent, repeated study of intimately known locales, although Knowles travelled more broadly while Cowley stayed, apart from her time at Emma Lake, within a few miles of Saskatoon. Lorna Russell also became a close friend of Cowley and spent a great deal of time on painting excursions with her:



Figure 14 Reta Cowley, *Untitled (Downtown Saskatoon)*, 1978
Watercolour on paper
56.5 x 74.9 cm

Reproduced by permission of Mrs. Gaye Leslie.

She had Alzheimer's for a number of years before she died. And when she got so she couldn't go out by herself, I took her out a number of those last years. I think for quite a while at the end of her life, she went to one place by the river, and did a scene across the river of a farm that was across from where she was on the west bank. I can't remember the farmer's name. Maybe Mr. Janzen. Anyway, those paintings never looked the same. You would never have known she did those paintings from the same place, every day. (Russell 2010, 8)

I have seen some of these last paintings and they are among the best of her life, the culmination of a sustained observation and representation of a few familiar locales.

One of Cowley's paintings from 1957 (Figure 13), although stylistically very different, is reminiscent of Lindner's work: it is close and intimate, the viewer being deeply embedded within the organic matrix; the picture plane is richly filled with an abundance of life forms and forces; the pictorial space is shallow and even. However,

there are other formal differences as well: there is no centralizing geometry to organize the chaotic sensations; there is no solidity behind the screen of flickering lights and shadows. Cowley has made of the picture plane a kind of partially transparent membrane through which sensations from the world may selectively pass, and conversely, our attention may be selectively directed toward elements of the world beyond. In this sense, her painting could be considered a kind of mandala, not in the formal, geometric structure, but in its function as a yantra.

Cowley has stated that her painting process consists of a series of responses to sensory inputs:

My first mark is anything at all that strikes me as most important. So then I have a patch of paint and then the paint takes over. One colour calls for another. ... Nature is constantly changing. I look up and see a colour and I record it. The next time I look up the colour is no longer there but I see another colour somewhere else. Gradually my painting is built up of these patches of colour. (Fenton, Reta Summers Cowley 2006, 40)

As such, her painting is a carefully constructed recording of her state of awareness of a given place at a given time; the viewer has access to this state through the membrane of the painted surface. This could be likened to the process of creating a mandala in order to induce a particular consciousness in the viewer.

The screen or membrane effect is even more apparent in Cowley's watercolours of the prairie near Saskatoon. She returned over and over to the same favourite locations within an easy journey from her home on Idylwyld Drive, either downtown to paint the city from an elevated perspective (see Figure 14), to the nearby riverbank, or sometimes as far as Knowles's studio near Langham, or out to Aberdeen. Knowles still returns, years after Cowley's passing, to the same locations, but often enough does not even leave her studio, which looks out over the North Saskatchewan River valley affording one of her most-recorded views.

Like Cowley, Knowles brings her subject to the surface of the canvas, as Otto Rogers describes it:

What is interesting about Dorothy's painting to me is that it is almost as if she is standing behind the canvas and pushing the image out to the surface of it. ... So

it's almost as if Dorothy, in a wonderful way—a romantic way—was within nature as a state of mind, as an observing soul! When it becomes a part of her own reality she is able to push it metaphorically through the back of the canvas to the front. (Rogers 2010, 10)



Figure 15 Dorothy Knowles, *Blue Water*, 2002
Acrylic on canvas
101.6 x 152.4 cm
Reproduced by permission of the artist.

By doing so she creates a membrane that filters the sensory chaos of the phenomenal world according to the patterns of her personal awareness, and communicates that sense of order to the viewer. Like Cowley, her paintings are not geometrically structured but rather dispersed over the picture plane like a viewing screen. Like both Lindner and Cowley, Knowles gives equal attention to every detail of the work, without emphasis, all parts contributing equally to the web of relationships that make up the whole. As Karen Wilkin writes, “The picture seems held together only by a uniform intensity of observation, spread apparently at random across the surface” (Wilkin 1979). The organizational principle extends far beyond the frame of the picture, which is merely a cross-section. The order is centred in her eye: she is the jar and her painting is a portion of the world reflected to us through her vision, a portion of the mandala. This reflected portion is so effective because it is so intimately known, the universal expressed through the details of the particular.

This evenness of distribution and adherence to the picture plane is evident in *Blue Water* (Figure 15) as is the transparency of the pictorial membrane. The location could be the river valley just below her studio or another of the undistinguished yet miraculous wetlands that she so values, returning so frequently that, as Terry Fenton says, “Painting them is like touching the ground” (Fenton, *Land Marks: The Art of Dorothy Knowles* 2008, 71). There is not a hint of overt religiosity in Dorothy Knowles’s paintings, but her limitless fascination with her immediate surroundings has developed into a seamless vision of wholeness and interconnected relationships, or as she says, “Everything is interwoven; it’s a tapestry” (Fenton, *Land Marks: The Art of Dorothy Knowles* 2008, 9). This combined sense of the interrelatedness of all things and the inestimable value of the local surroundings is the basis of the contemporary form of geopiety, that is, ecology.



Figure 16 David Garneau, *Consider the Sacred Wood (for Bob Boyer)*, Triptych (right panel), 2004
Oil on canvas
121.9 x 121.9 cm
Reproduced by permission of the artist.

Another artist who keeps returning to the sacred ground is David Garneau, Associate Professor at the University of Regina, who makes a regular pilgrimage along the Carleton Trail from Red River to Fort Edmonton, the route traversed by his Metis forebears. There are specific locations along the way, such as graveyards or ceremonial sites that are literally considered hallowed ground, whether marked or unmarked. During our interview at Garneau's office and studio at the University of Regina, he explained how there are limits to what can be depicted, protocols that must be observed to properly honour these sacred places. In one painting in progress on an easel beside us, only the smoke hole of a tipi is visible, but Garneau explains how this is really adjacent to his subject:

So, this painting shows a teepee beside a sweat lodge where I had a particular experience. I can't depict the sweat lodge but I can depict the teepee that I changed in and evoke, through symbolism, the event that happened in the lodge. And there were other sites for me that have that power ... sometimes there's cultural protocol, like, for instance, you're not supposed to take photos of certain things ... (Garneau 2010, 8-9)

This interdiction against the direct portrayal of sacred objects and holy personages is common among the Indigenous peoples of the world, and is also observed by Muslims and Bahá'ís, resulting in a rich heritage of indirect references and symbolic depictions in the visual arts. Indirect reference is not, however, restricted to religious art, as metaphor is the substance of artistic expression: perhaps the core of things is simply too potent to approach directly.

Another technique that Garneau uses to sanctify these places within his paintings is to construct a protective screen across the picture plane, permitting only a limited view of the subject beyond (again, not the venerated object itself, but a proximate referent). This screen may be composed of a matrix of simulated beads arranged in traditional Metis patterns, or it may be a screen of branches, as in Figure 16. As Garneau mentioned in the interview, these are poplar trees, or trembling aspen, that reproduce primarily through vegetative means, that is, through interconnected root systems. Thus countless stems, even entire stands of aspen may be parts of a single individual organism and be extremely long-lived and virtually indestructible. Garneau considers this to be an excellent metaphor for the Metis people. The structure beyond the branches is scarcely

perceptible, and could certainly not be identified except by someone who already knows it well. The screen reveals as much as it obscures: it has its own substance that affects the view beyond, its own subject that creates an additional layer of information about the pictured space and about the artist. The viewer's attention is shifted, coloured, filtered by the screen in a process analogous to that of the mandala or the membrane. Looking at the places selected by the artist through this screen, the viewer is influenced to honour the land as the artist does. The membrane functions to permit only information befitting a sacred shrine to be transmitted, only good thoughts.



Figure 17 Greg Hardy, *Evening Storm*, 2010
Acrylic on canvas
76.8 x 203.8 cm
Reproduced by permission of the artist.

Several of the artists that I spoke to in the course of my research expressed their admiration for the work of Greg Hardy (1950–). I first met him in the winter of 1980 or 1981, when I made the drive in darkness to be welcomed into his tiny two-room house which was barely lit by kerosene lamps and warmed by a beautiful cast-iron pot-bellied stove. He was working on the design for the gigantic mural on the Sturdy-Stone building that he executed with ceramic artist Randy Woolsey. His minute studio was filled, as I recall, with containers of felt markers, hundreds of them, in varying stages of wear, and stacks of studies on paper which he showed me with enthusiasm.

Last fall, on one of those glorious golden-yellow days, I met him on the back deck of his Saskatoon house to talk about the reasons for painting: the motivation, the purpose. He said:

I almost think of myself as an abstract painter. The abstract elements are, in many ways more interesting and arresting to the eyes than the subject matter. The subject matter has been important because I'm deeply moved by what I see in the natural world, and I don't want to depict or describe what I'm seeing, but I do want to make art that in some way reflects my emotion, or picks up on my emotion about what I'm seeing. And then hopefully that charge will get into the paintings. (Hardy 2010, 2)

And further:

I tend to want to paint things that give enough clues or enough information that the viewer will be able to get some degree of the same sense of wonder that I had in the first place. And whether they can or not, I don't know, but that's ... I would accept that as a level of success, if people can get that same rush from looking at the painting as I got from actually being out there.

So that's a good enough purpose for painting, then?

It really is. (Hardy 2010, 8)

Hardy's love of the land and the light is indeed successfully conveyed through his paintings, as in *Evening Storm* (Figure 17) in which the looming threat of a summer storm hovers over the eerily still water. His genuine emotion is unmistakable; his paintings function as powerful talismans invoking the numina of the prairie or the woodlands. However, unlike the membranous paintings just discussed, Hardy's paintings present a mirror, like the aspect of the jar that reflects everything around it. The mirror reflects the light of the world allowing the consciousness of the viewer to meet the consciousness of the painter. Indeed, the paintings are centers in themselves, a locus for the exchange of creative energies, more than they are representations of some external reality. Otto Rogers is even more radical in his description of Greg's work:

You look at Greg Hardy's paintings and you're not looking at nature. You could argue that you were, but what you experience is an elevated enthusiasm on the part of that artist for being alive! When he looks at a single cloud he is even more animated, that natural element becomes a mirror of himself. He takes the light in his joyous condition as we all should. This act is not born of the ego, but rather of excitement in experiencing oneself as part of the creation of an all-loving Creator.

When you look at his paintings you do not know for certain if the clouds are rock or mountains or wedges of paint, they are all of those things and none of those things. What you are being presented with is the reality of Greg. (Rogers 2010, 17)

The “wedges of paint” that Rogers praises are evident in both *Evening Storm* and *Shoreline* (Figure 18) serving, as he suggests, as both clouds and rocks. Robert Christie (1946–), one of Saskatoon’s foremost authorities on prairie painting and a superb paint-handler himself, describes some of Hardy’s recent clouds as “chocolate chip ice-cream and caramel and other stuff, that is not quite fully blended” (Christie 2010, 25). In each case, due to Hardy’s masterful handling, the reference is perfectly clear, and yet we are simultaneously aware, joyfully aware, of the paint body with its striations of imperfectly blended pigments that trace the energized movement of the painter’s hand. Hardy does not go as far as mentioning the Creator, but he does admit that “painting is, really, a form of spiritual practice” (Hardy 2010, 9). His practice, like the artists already discussed, is focussed on small, familiar areas within reach of his home.



Figure 18 Greg Hardy, *Shoreline*, 2010
Acrylic and pastel on linen
76.2 x 114.3 cm
Reproduced by permission of the artist.

I’ve been up north a lot, and so I’ve always been really intrigued by it. And every year I’ve always done a number of paintings that have been northern-based ... and when I found that place [his cabin at La Ronge] it was just sort of love at first sight with a place that was relatively confined. And so all the paintings that I’ve done from there have all been within a very small area, and I’ve become familiar

with the area enough that I feel comfortable with it speaking to me constantly. (Hardy 2010, 14)

Hardy returns to these places over and over, making repeated sketches and often executing numerous variations of the same scene, such as the rock face in *Shoreline*. He knows these rocks and waters, just as O'Keefe knows her hills.

David Thauberger (1948–) is a Regina painter who makes a regular pilgrimage through his favourite small towns, especially Moose Jaw, looking for inspiration primarily in the built environment of the shops on Main Street or the small businesses at the edge of the prairie. His view is iconic, direct, frontal. Thauberger was powerfully affected by his meetings with amateur rural artists, as he described in our interview, in response to my question about the genesis of his extended series of building fronts:

That really comes from my own life experience of living in a small town and growing up there, and always being a little bit amazed as a small kid ... driving down Main Street and seeing all those false-fronted buildings ... at that time I was doing some research also with a number of artists who were Saskatchewan folk artists from that generation, and again, in driving through the small towns and visiting these people, and looking at the work they were doing, where they were living, the sources that their work was coming from, I got re-inspired, excited again about the small town and what it presented in terms of iconography, in terms of imagery for painting! ... Painters are supposed to paint what they know. And I thought I'd take kind of a more literal aspect of that, and re-paint what I know, and I started making paintings from my own hometown, and a very interesting thing happened. The closer and closer the paintings that I made got to my own experience of my hometown, the wider the audience became ... (Thauberger 2010, 2)

As a result of his exposure to the folk artists Thauberger became fascinated with the universality of depictions of the particular. He selected a painting by W.C. McCargar from the Saskatchewan Arts Board Collection where he worked, and hung it over his desk. He was also very impressed with Molly Lenhardt, the shopkeeper from Melville who painted iconic portraits, and began to make use of similar frontal portrayals in his paintings of shops and houses.

These intimate architectural portraits were partly fabricated, or “constructed,” as Thauberger pointed out, in a manner not unlike that adopted by some of the farmers-turned-painters who approached their artistic endeavours with the same approach as other

farm tasks—as builders. They would sometimes simply adhere objects or other materials to the surface of their paintings with the conviction that this was the most direct method of simulation. Thauberger gradually developed a very personal practice of applying paint with a range of tools, as the farmer might simply choose the most effective tool in the shop, and came to call it “simulation,” as in his 2002 exhibition at the Moose Jaw Museum and Art Gallery, *Genuine Simulations*.

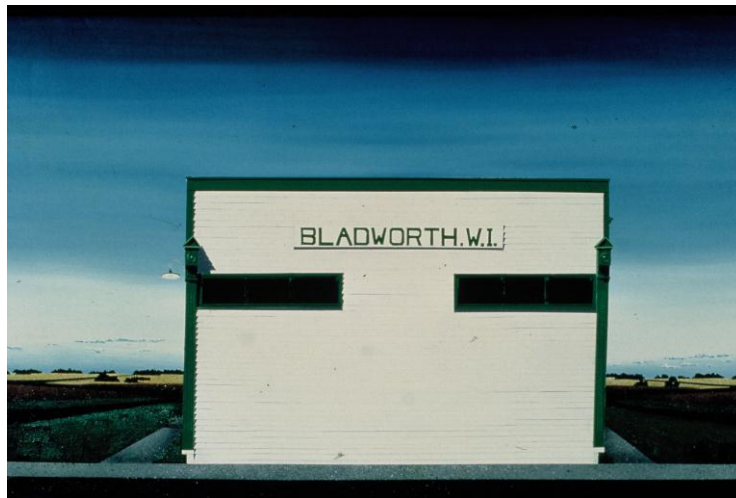


Figure 19 David Thauberger, *Kachina*, 1981
Acrylic and glitter on canvas
114.9 x 172.7 cm
Collection of the Toronto-Dominion Bank
Reproduced by permission of the artist.

When I visited his Regina studio I found the door standing wide open and the radio playing loudly inside. Thauberger was singing along and neither heard my knock nor saw me standing in the doorway, so I retreated slightly and observed as he worked. He was trimming and affixing a brown paper stencil to a large canvas on the wall, and then began to paint around the edges of it with a large brush. Eventually he noticed me and invited me in to wait while he finished what he was doing. He explained that the stencil is just one of an ever-growing collection of techniques that achieve a particular effect, techniques such as airbrushing, scraping with a comb, splattering or gluing on sparkle dust.

More than simply portraits of buildings, Thauberger's simulations are selective views of the prairie environment, conditioned, as they inevitably must be, by his own experience and perspective. The buildings are curiously placed so that we are allowed only a tantalizing glimpse of the landscape beyond and surrounding them, as in *Kachina* (Figure 19), but nevertheless, the buildings do inhabit a recognizable place. They are like shrines or markers of a sacred spot, although Thauberger does not attribute anything like a religious significance to them. Still, in their form and function, they are like icons: a carefully constructed image of an ideal world at a slight remove from the one we inhabit. Because of Thauberger's meticulous attention to surface structure and pattern, the viewer's gaze is arrested at the picture plane, making of the paint a mirror where his particular view of the world is reflected.

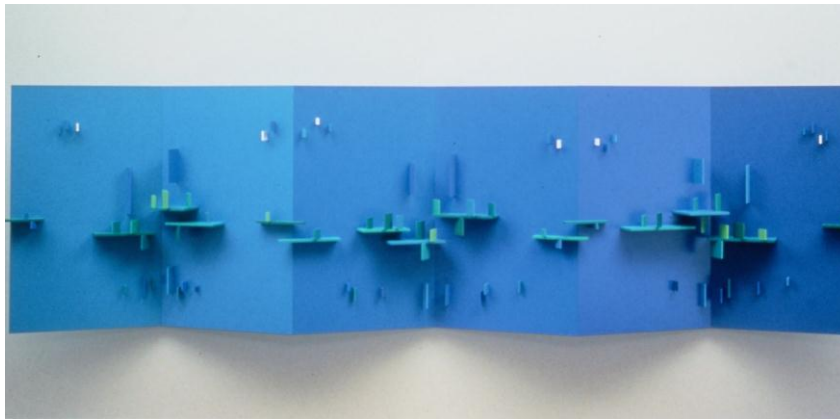


Figure 20 Eli Bornstein, *Quadriplane Structurist Relief No. 1 (River-Screen Series)*, 1989-96
Acrylic enamel on aluminum and plexiglas
54.6 x 186.7 x 16.5 cm
Reproduced by permission of the artist.

Eli Bornstein (1922–), Professor Emeritus at the University of Saskatchewan, in his numerous writings and in person, reveals himself to be much more aligned with the scientific than with the religious. Although not primarily a painter, Bornstein has had a profound impact on prairie art both as an academic and as a producer of magnificently crafted structures. He emphasizes, both in his structurist reliefs (Figure 20) and in his writings, an intimate connection between art and nature, a relationship that is aptly celebrated in the following quotation:

I walk out upon the riverbank each day ... My river is like an unfolding ribbon or screen of colour that reflects the constantly changing light of the sky and position of the sun. Diurnal and nocturnal, throughout the changing seasons, there is a continuous transition of colour from greens to blue-greens, green-blues to intense blues, purple-blues and deep purples. There are ranges of intensity and value and transitions and mergings of one into another along this horizontal stretch of colour. There is not a colour of the entire spectrum that is not sometimes to be seen here. No artist can invent a colour that this strip of chromatic mirror cannot reflect. (Nasgaard 2007, 293)

Henry David Thoreau never described the ice of his beloved ponds more poetically. Notice that Bornstein refers to “my river,” in the sense of a place intimately known. I also know this scene, for I walk along the same river almost every day, and find my inspiration there. What Bornstein describes here is at the heart of geopiety: a genuine and intimate love of his immediate surroundings, a sense of wonder and admiration for the beauty and order of the world. The central image of the mirror that reflects all things around it, even the potential works of imagined artists, brings us back to the jar in the wilderness, and the role of the painting as a center of gravity that establishes a sacred, web-like relationship between the viewer and the wide world. Bornstein affirms this direct connection between artist and environment in the common origin of landscape and abstraction:

It seems to me that, rather than being opposed, landscape painting and formalism and abstraction, represent a continuum rather than an abrupt or total change. In fact, the origin of abstract painting can be traced to the origin of landscape painting. (Bornstein 2010, 4)

This origin is precisely that epiphany that awakens in the artist the conviction that something miraculous has occurred; a spirit has revealed itself from beyond the quotidian, beyond the habitual perceptual framework. It is worth recalling that at one time the artist’s “genius” was considered to be a guiding spirit, distinct from and well beyond the control of the artist. Although Bornstein’s sense of order is rational, grounded in a structured relationship between nature and science, his river imagery evokes an awe of cosmic proportions; his construction is equal to it, a fitting monument to the elegance and grandeur of the mirror’s symmetry. Bornstein does not make use of the two-dimensional radial symmetry of the mandala, but his structures are frequently mirror-like,

and exquisitely balanced. In *Quadriplane Structurist Relief No. 1*, the planes unfold in a continuous sequence that suggests unending variations; the arrangements have such a strong correspondence to organic processes that they could almost be mistaken for some kind of arcane genetic model or the notations for a multi-dimensional dance.

Faced with the power of the ineffable, many prairie artists respond by marking the event with a painted image, like Greg Hardy, hoping to convey a “sense of wonder” or Lorna Russell trying to capture “extra special colors” (Russell 2010, 14). Often, the resulting paintings exhibit characteristic structural traits that correspond to archetypal symbols like the mandala, the mirror or other related symmetries. In many cases, this practice is not intentional, or even fully conscious, but nevertheless it leaves a perceptible trace, in the form of the sacred geometry, of the artist’s encounter with the divine.

Chapter Two: Horizons

W.J.T. Mitchell contributed the opening essay, “Imperial Landscape,” for *Landscape and Power*, a collection of essays that examine from various perspectives the connection between the forces of worldly power and representations of the land. In the course of his argument he includes the following quote from Emerson’s essay, “Nature,” in which the author affirms that an artist, or poet, “owns” the horizon in much the same way that Hunker and O’Keefe claim an intimate relationship with “their” land.

The charming landscape which I saw this morning is indubitably made up of some twenty or thirty farms. Miller owns this field, Locke that, and Manning the woodland beyond. But none of them owns the landscape. There is a property in the horizon which no man has but he whose eye can integrate all the parts, that is, the poet. This is the best of these men’s farms, yet to this their warranty-deeds give no title. (W. Mitchell 2002, 13-4)

While I am interested in how an artist can “integrate all the parts,” Mitchell’s concern is with the use of landscape as a “fetishized commodity ... an emblem of the social relations it conceals” (W. Mitchell 2002, 15). It is true that there is an important omission from Emerson’s list of parties. While Miller, Locke, and Manning have the title deeds, and the poet has the horizon, the original inhabitants of the land, who were, even during Emerson’s lifetime, being pushed out of the way of the expanding nation, are left with banishment, poverty, scorn and no opportunity to scan the horizon.

Mitchell’s essay zealously reduces all landscape painting to a symptom and an outworn expression of imperial power, concluding with the words, “What we know now is that landscape itself is the medium by which this evil is veiled and naturalized” (Ibid 30). Mitchell’s use of the same pronoun, “we” for which he condemns Kenneth Clark, combined with the narrowness of this assertion, suggests an intellectual elitism replacing the Eurocentrism. In his opening he aphoristically states, “landscape is an exhausted medium, no longer viable as a mode of artistic expression” (Ibid 5). We may as well say that speech is an exhausted medium and no longer viable, or that songs no longer serve, or stories. His zeal to dispense with the “medium,” as he calls it, reminds me of those who would similarly dispatch all painting, or even all art, presumably out of a desire to

appear “free” of the fetters of tradition and more sophisticated than those who have preceded them.



Figure 21 Wesley Dennis, *The Homesteader*, 1969

Oil on panel

81.9 x 102.2 cm

Collection of the Saskatchewan Property Management Corporation, Regina

Reproduced by permission of the Moose Jaw Museum & Art Gallery.

What I value from Mitchell’s argument is the insistence that some paintings do veil and “naturalize” the violence of colonialism by their omissions. By way of example, consider Wesley Dennis’s (1899–1981) eerie painting, *The Homesteader* (Figure 21) in which the entire visible world, from the immediate foreground to the horizon and beyond, appear to belong to the solitary farmer: his plough, his cattle, his tractor, his shack, his field surround him. There is of course no indication that the land ever did belong to anyone else or that anything is amiss. As Keith Bell wrote in his contribution to the recent anthology *Perspectives of Saskatchewan*:

Artists who came to live in Saskatchewan set out to render the “featureless” landscapes of the province both visible and acceptably familiar to the settlers who moved into the west in the first part of the twentieth century. This process of naturalization was not only a matter of picturing an unfamiliar place but in fact played a crucial ideological role in the appropriation both of the land and its representation from the First Nations peoples who occupied it. (Bell 2009, 256)

It is evident that enough views of this kind cumulatively propagate a sense of normality that does not include all the facts, a state of “normality” that endures for many decades as in this nostalgic work. However, this is equally true of artefacts in any medium: the newspaper, the radio, the town hall, Grandma’s petit-point, all display the same disregard for the fate of the Indigenous inhabitants while shamelessly appropriating their symbols. During the ascendancy of the British Empire, and quite possibly other empires, all cultural forms, including those commonly recognized as “landscape,” inevitably reflected and to some degree served the colonial enterprise. Paintings produced during the height of the British Empire no doubt reflect the inequities of conquest and settlement, and continue to some extent do so. In one passage Mitchell describes landscape as “tailor-made for the discourse of imperialism” (W. Mitchell 2002, 17). While apparently referring to all landscape, he is really offering an accurate description of a more limited case. Imperialism gains its strength from the co-option of every cultural pursuit, not only landscape, as Edward Said and others have amply demonstrated. However, the imperium is not quite universal and not quite absolute: other content persists and refuses to be co-opted. A project of “integrating all the parts of the landscape” demands not the condemnation of the medium, but the restoration of the banished people, and not solely in literature, but in actuality. It demands the recognition of our shared history, as Gerald McMaster suggests in his essay “Our (Inter) Related History” (McMaster, *Our (Inter) Related History* 2002). McMaster, born in 1953 on Red Pheasant Reserve, became curator of the Canadian Galleries at the Art Gallery of Ontario in 2005 where, in a radical reinstallation he placed traditional First Nations art works alongside Group of Seven paintings. Mitchell’s horizon is simply too restricted.

A reading of Dennis’s painting that is restricted to the implications of ownership ignores other possible readings: a contextual reading would lead to the fact of Dennis’s unschooled status and his relation to other “naive” artists of the prairies, indeed, to the whole question of what this term actually signifies; a purely formal reading could reveal a relationship between this painting and various mystical schools of painting, such as magic realism or modern abstraction. As a quintessentially modern landscape it distinguishes itself from the romantic tradition by the barrenness and aridity of the world

it refers to, as well as the sense of isolation. The primary division of the canvas is the horizon which neatly bisects the picture, dividing the world into two distinct realms: the material, physical, animal plane, inhabited by the solitary human, a world of labour; and a celestial realm of light and space that appears to be infinitely removed from the awareness of both the human and the only other visible inhabitants, the grazing cattle, who all have their attention firmly fixed on the earthly plane. The horizon is the metaphorical subject of this painting, as the boundary between this world and what lies beyond it, between the known and the unknown. Like the paintings examined in Chapter One, this too can be read as a form of sacred geometry.

As Mitchell repeatedly insists, landscape—I would say painting—is capable of conveying limitless significance, including political, social, aesthetic, emotional and spiritual content. I have chosen to investigate the presence of spiritual content in this body of work since few, if any, have done so. Mitchell’s caution, that other types of content tend to obscure the violence implicit in landscape painting, is worth heeding, but does not negate the importance of the range of other possible significations.

In fact, it could be argued that he presents an oversimplified situation: there is no single homogenous “settler” population, just as there is no single homogenous Indigenous population; nor is there a single homogenous category of “landscape painting.” The designation “landscape painting” is problematic, as the artists that I’ve interviewed have suggested. It is a division that they do not recognize, either in their own work or in that of their colleagues. Several of the artists I interviewed stated that they saw no important distinction between “landscape” and “abstraction.” Abstraction is inherent in painting, but as a stylistic category it refers to a broad formalism. Robert Christie considers formalism to be at the core of every successful painting:

I look hard at pictures and I don’t see the difference, other than outward appearance ... The good landscape paintings are, I’m going to say, formalist-based. ... It’s basing your work on the understanding that you can make it better or worse through your knowledge or lack thereof of the formal elements of design and composition. So, a good landscape painting, in my opinion, uses those in the same manner as a very good totally non-objective, abstract painting does. It’s just that you have a different outward appearance. (Christie 2010, 13)

A landscape painting is based on formalism, and a formalist painting is based on observation. Otto Rogers stated that, “There is no such thing as a painting that is not derived, in one way or another, from the natural world. There’s no such thing as abstract painting, versus some other kind of painting ...” (Rogers 2010, 12). Thus, although it is difficult to discuss painting without the use of these terms, it is important to remember that they are not mutually exclusive.

Prairie artists of the last half-century, in particular, have tended toward a looseness of application that undermines the familiar landscape category and dissolves the painting into its constituent formal parts. Regina painter Heather Cline traces the origin of this tendency, at least in part, to the work of Reta Cowley:

I helped catalogue Reta Cowley’s work when the estate came into Art Placement. In fact, I spent half a year. And she’s it, man. She’s the one who really took the landscape and broke it apart, and made it into shape, form, and pattern, and it became Saskatchewan abstraction. (Cline 2010, 19)

As a result, even distinctions of subject matter such as “still life” or “figure” have been subsumed to the more pertinent aspects of formal expression, and, as I argue in Chapter One, to the function of the painting as a membrane.

The horizon is the limit of what we can see from our current position. The word “horizon” occurs frequently in the Bahá’í writings, an important source of inspiration for a number of Saskatoon artists, due mainly to the influence of Otto Donald Rogers (1935–), Bahá’í artist and professor at the University of Saskatchewan from 1959 to 1988. The metaphor of the horizon reminds us that there is a limit to what we can understand at this stage of our development, just as there is a limit to what we can perceive from this earthly perspective. Although the horizon is conventionally represented in pictures by a horizontal line, this line is in actuality a segment of a great circle, the boundary of our visible world as we stand and turn to take it all in, as in the Greek root, “limiting circle.” This is an important distinction because the straight line, as in the survey grid, belongs to an undifferentiated and inert universe that is subject to arbitrary division by a merely human agent, whereas the circle denotes both a center and a circumference, that is, a point of origin that is discontinuous with its surroundings as a result of its significance. The world, the round world, is created from this center and surrounds it, as in the analogy

of the jar. Thus it is important to realize that the horizon in a prairie painting is more than an arbitrary division: it is the circle, both embracing and limiting, that corresponds to a center in some way sanctified, set apart, significant.

Most of the paintings that I have selected are not apparently religious in their content; this would likely be true of any collection of prairie painting. Few of the artists are overtly religious or paint with an intent to make a sacred object, although a surprising number affirm that painting is spiritual work. Yet, as historian of religion, Mircea Eliade suggests, there is a sacred aspect to the paintings in spite of the artists' intentions, and in spite of the influence of the secular context in which they work (Eliade, *Symbolism, the Sacred and the Arts* 1986, 82). Within such a context, it is understandable that prairie paintings have thus far been viewed and evaluated variously as extensions of the European landscape tradition, as settlement discourse, as romantic nostalgia, as aesthetic objects. I suggest that it is equally possible to view prairie paintings as examples of a sacred geometry by keeping in mind that the horizon is a circle.

It has been thoroughly established that the horizon is an inescapable presence for prairie dwellers. Robert Christie presents an outline of post-settlement painting in his *Watercolour Painting in Saskatchewan 1905-1980*, in which he reminds us that the absence of picturesque features "continually forced the artist to consider the essential horizontal divisions of land and sky" (Christie, *Watercolour Painting in Saskatchewan 1905-1980* 1981, 21). Certainly this has been the fundamental and recognizable characteristic of prairie landscape painting in its most recent and most familiar form. Christie goes on to say that, "without any major geographic wonders to confuse the issue, the painter was freed to elaborate on the nuances of paint handling" (Ibid). This sounds plausible, and may explain in part the powerful growth of abstraction.

Yet painters do not simply transfer some portion of a visual "reality" onto a picture plane, as Nelson Goodman, Ernst Gombrich and others have demonstrated (in the first chapter of Goodman's *Languages of Art* and all of Gombrich's *Art and Illusion*, but especially the first chapter). Painting is an invention that refers to the world beyond its limits in a selective and idiosyncratic fashion: it is metaphorical. Thus the predominance of the horizon in prairie painting must have significance apart from the insistent fact of its

presence in the phenomenal world, or the absence of visual distractions. Sky Glabush (1970–), a painter who attended the University of Saskatchewan and lived for several years on the prairie, makes a direct link in an artist’s statement between the metaphorical nature of painting and the human inclination toward the spiritual:

It is in a perpetual state of referring away from itself, directing the viewer somewhere else. ... Painting by its very nature becomes a metaphor of the leaning towards spirit. While it is rooted in its own corporeality, it is always moving toward the evanescent, toward those instances of acuity that can’t be named by the tongue, those things that slip between language and intent. (Long 2000)



Figure 22 Terry Fenton, *Allowance*, 2009
Oil on panel
61 x 99.1 cm
Reproduced by permission of the artist.

In this sense, every painting is both an instance of the horizon and a reference to it; a concrete example of the limits of perception and a signifier of the greater frame. In the work of an individual artist, the limiting circle of the personal horizon characterizes the work and establishes the nature of that which is indicated beyond itself, the realm of mystery that it indicates.

Terry Fenton (1940–), Saskatoon painter, author and former director of both the Mendel Art Gallery and the Edmonton Art Gallery, paints prairie landscapes that consist of almost nothing but horizon. He has pared down the already spare trope to its

irreducible elements. His horizon seems to be no more than a formal division of the picture plane, a convenient place to set buildings as a focal point (Figure 22). Throughout his extensive writings about prairie painting he has reiterated the paramount importance of formal concerns and this is almost all that remains in his minimal depiction of the prairies. Helen Marzolf describes his work, in her essay for the exhibition *A Wide Horizon*, with a poetry that seems to overflow the sparse composition:

The anecdotal horizon of barns, defunct fences, machine sheds and sixties bungalows, is reduced to a graphic frieze that, in turn, animates the tectonics of sky and land. *Anticipation* ... is a face-off between a foreground of chem-fallow earth pigments against dusky pastels, separated by a slender horizon line with a shorthand dot of a grain bin, maybe. There's a minimal beauty to the radically depopulated, rural landscape, sparsely marked by the gleaming steel bins and sheds of board room / coffee row landlords. Fenton reduces the architectural evidence of settlement history to a distant, provisional frieze, leaving it enigmatic and open-ended. (Marzolf 2004)



Figure 23 Reta Cowley, *Sand and Reflected Clouds*, n.d.
Oil on Masonite panel
25.3 x 30.1 cm
Reproduced by permission of Mrs. Gaye Leslie.

I don't know whether a "tectonics of the sky" is possible, but I appreciate the imaginative reading. Perhaps there is even something nostalgic about Fenton's paintings, a sense of

lost innocence that I can sympathize with. But there is more: even this minimal depiction refers to the great circle as seen from a central viewpoint, an exact location chosen by the artist. His choice confers significance and renders this hallowed ground, if in no other sense than that he has claimed this as his home, the place that he desires to know and love.

If Fenton's paintings typify the most popular and ubiquitous form of prairie landscape, they are also the purest distillation of it. Perhaps the overwhelming popularity of the genre among settlers is precisely due to the restriction, which can be protective and lend security, like a fence. Fences are the sign of settlement, and define the familiar, but may also be barricades to the numinous. Perhaps these paintings are indications of an unrecognized yearning for the sacred (or for home) that is widely shared by settler descendants.

An entirely different situation exists in the paintings of Reta Cowley. I can't agree with Dan Ring's assessment of Cowley's paintings as primarily "sited in the experience of settling and developing the prairies" (Ring 1986). Cowley lived almost her whole life in Saskatoon, traveling daily in summer to the nearby countryside to paint what she found there: not a nostalgic return to a rural childhood, but a factual record of the prairie surrounding her. "Factual" may be the wrong word: Cowley's response to the visual stimuli offered by a particular place and time is entirely personal, immediate, idiosyncratic, an attempt to set down the fleeting impressions of an ever-shifting moment (see Figure 23). But it is a direct response to an existing reality, not reminiscence or idealization. When I asked Lorna Russell who had most influenced her, she replied without hesitation, "Reta Cowley," but then qualified this by saying that she was influenced "a certain amount by her art, but more than that by her ethics in art" (Russell 2010, 8). Robert Christie characterized her as "a true artist," someone who is unusually sincere and exhibits an exemplary integrity in all her pursuits (Christie 2010, 17).

Cowley's intensely recorded moment establishes a center: in Eliade's terms, it is the result of a hierophany, that is, the sacred, in the form of the dazzling fecundity of nature, making itself known to the artist, thereby creating a world that exists in relation to that center. Cowley's horizon is an almost unimportant pictorial element, overpowered by

the margin that she habitually reserves around her image. This is itself a reference to a delimiting horizon, if not round, then less rigidly square than the picture frame. The difference between this depiction and Fenton's is that Cowley has succeeded in communicating the numinous power of her experience through the directness of her gesture and the concentration of her pictorial elements. Her painting becomes a marker, a monument that embodies the sacred nature of the event in the manner of a ritual object. It is an icon.



Figure 24 Kim Ennis, *Blue Horizon*, 2008
Acrylic on canvas
50.8 x 101.6 cm
Collection of the artist
Reproduced by permission of the artist.

Clint Hunker also returns repeatedly to familiar locations near the city where he paints what he finds.

I have no problem with painting a field, for instance, with wheat. As opposed to prairie grasses ... it's all one. I accept it, and as an artist, I feel that it's my job to record it. With as much truth as I possibly can. And to do that without inflection. I try to get rid of the inflection. (Hunker 2010, 2)

He talks about Cowley working the same way, simply absorbing the visual information without judgment, and responding to it with a corresponding movement of the brush, a kind of note taking.

She's treating everything that she's looking at in terms of it being nature, *as it has become*. So whether it's a farm or whatever, she's treating it as an organic, living thing. ... On the other side of that, though, she's also painting herself out of the picture. In other words, she's not trusting herself to put something in that isn't there. Every response, every mark, comes out of the experience of her connecting to nature. (Hunker 2010, 1, emphasis mine)

This kind of detached observation, in the work of both Cowley and Hunker, accepts the world "as it has become." It is neither nostalgic nor romantic, nor is it critical, for that matter. For both of them, and possibly for Fenton as well, the horizon is simply the limit of what they can see from here. It is the boundary of what is possible for the individual at this time.

For other painters, the horizon serves entirely different purposes. A long view toward the thin blue line of distant land may simply refer to a wistful or contemplative state of mind, receptivity to possibilities, a restful pause on the journey, as in my own painting of the Saskatchewan River Valley (Figure 24). Aldous Huxley, in *Heaven and Hell*, advances the theory that humans find surpassing beauty of a transformative nature in that which is viewed from a great distance as well as in that which is seen from very near, such as a fine jewel. He suggests that the luminosity of the jewel is repeated in the distant horizon, and that either is capable of inducing a visionary state.

Huxley further speculates about the reasons why we find views of the distant horizon so captivating.

When I look at the Sung landscape [of distant mountains], I am reminded ... of the crags, the boundless expanses of plain, the luminous skies and seas of the mind's antipodes. And those disappearances into mist and cloud, those sudden emergences of some strange, intensely definite form ... these too, are transporting. For they remind me, consciously or unconsciously, of the Other World's essential alienness and unaccountability. (Huxley 1961, 103)

Huxley uses the term "antipodes of the mind" to signify those regions of consciousness that are reached through meditation or prayer, the spiritual centers, perhaps, or the loci for religious encounters, but in any case, at a great remove from ordinary consciousness.

His description of the Chinese landscape recalls the paintings of Sasha Rogers, daughter of Otto Rogers, in which we are certainly transported to another level of

awareness, perhaps at the portal of another world. Sasha Rogers spent her youth in Saskatoon, received degrees in fine art from both the University of Saskatchewan and the University of Alberta, and evidently carried the prairie with her to Toronto where she now resides. She has, for more than a decade, repeatedly painted the horizon, nakedly, insistently, excluding virtually all other pictorial references (Figure 25). In spite of, or perhaps because of, the absence of familiar narrative elements she manages to evoke a powerful sense of mystery and almost infinite space. She has stripped the landscape of every possible feature, leaving only the unearthly contrast between one level and another. Frequently, in her very long series of similar paintings, as in *Advancing Light*, there is an enticing glow on the horizon, as though a beacon, or a sign of distant hope in a vast and foreign landscape. Or is it something troubling, vaguely threatening? In any case, the metaphor succeeds, and the painting directs us far beyond the earthly plane. The horizon in these paintings is less a limitation than an invitation: something from beyond our normal sphere beckons and offers a means of passage to another level of awareness.



Figure 25 Sasha Rogers, *Advancing Light*, 2007
104.1 x 144.8 cm
Reproduced by permission of the artist.

A very different kind of mystery is revealed in the paintings of Saskatoon artist Alicia Popoff (1950–). Through her daily meditations in paint she offers us an

opportunity to surpass the horizon of the fantastic, to glimpse the world of her fertile imagination. She described in our interview how she goes for daily walks and absorbs the sensations of the prairie, taking in the birdcalls and the wind in the grass.



Figure 26 Alicia Popoff, *Coral Evolution*, 2006
Acrylic on paper
52.7 x 63.5 cm
Reproduced by permission of the artist.

My work is non-representational, but my influence is living on the prairies ... I don't paint landscapes, necessarily. ... if you put a horizon line in your painting, you've got a landscape, but the thing is that you cannot live on the prairies all your life and not be influenced by the landscape or the environment. (Popoff 2010, 6)

I don't take things out of the landscape as much as influences, like going for walks and thinking about stuff when you're out there, and then it all comes back in, whether they're the flowers or the sky or the birds or whatever. (Popoff 2010, 11)

I think the most exciting thing is to walk up on a prairie bluff or something, like in Eagle Creek or Biggar or even out here someplace. It's not the prairie, the original prairie, just some of those places, they're just so beautiful! And the lighting at night, and the sunrise or sunset or something. Just different coloring. (Popoff 2010, 33)

She then returns to her studio and through the unhindered movement of her brush populates her canvasses with fabulous stories enacted by a sublimated alphabet. I wonder if these paintings could possibly bear some relation to the Dream Time of the Australian Aborigines. Perhaps it is just that Popoff's paintings seem to live within her own dreaming, embraced by the horizon of her inner vision.



Figure 27 David Garneau, *Beautiful Bird*, 2005
Oil on canvas
76 x 46 cm
Reproduced by permission of the artist.

I see in these paintings a figurative resemblance to the work of some Inuit artists, such as Pitseolak Ashoona, or Pudlo Pudlat, a playful, even humorous attitude to both the delineation and the placement of figures. Their work beckons to its viewers like a beacon from beyond a cultural horizon as Popoff's does from beyond the horizon of fancy. *Coral Evolution* (Figure 26) seems to be a playful rendering of the early beginnings of life on the planet, with slender plants reaching toward a distant star, and clumsily threatening

animal shapes poised to consume each other. It is the illustration of a myth that has yet to be recounted, a vital moment that was not observed. The figures inhabit their own stratum, not safe, but isolated, for the moment, from unknowable life forms in adjacent worlds. In spite of their otherworldly appearance, Popoff insists that the figures originate in her immediate surroundings:

I don't really paint symbols ... but there's like a symbology of forms that you see out there that you relate—I think the symbols that I work with, or the shapes that I work with, forms that I work with, are very familiar to me. They're invented but they really come from places around me. (Popoff 2010, 45)

The figures emerge from the environment, yet they are also “invented.” Is this not a description of the appearance of a numen, a spirit that inhabits the nearby prairie and finds its way across the horizon of the manifest world into the imagination of the resident artist in the manner of the “genius,” or the muse?

The horizon of yet another dimension is presented in one of several distinct lines of development in the work of David Garneau. Like much of Garneau's work, the paintings in his *Road Kill* series (see Figure 27) are very deliberate, carefully crafted multi-level references. He calls them “memento mori” paintings, perhaps their most obvious function, but also says that they are “playing on abstraction and the history of representation and abstraction in this province” (Garneau 2010, 4). Given that Garneau is by his own declaration “responding to and against” what he describes as “formalist attitudes or landscape painting in this place,” he may be referring to a cultural hit-and-run, the brutal slaying of something sacred (Ibid 7). He also pointed out in our interview that the road kill paintings mark a particular site, like other sacred sites commemorated in his paintings, and reminded me that the Metis were once known as the “road allowance people” or the “ditch people” because they made camps in the only land available to them, the yet-unused portions of the surveyed grid. Of course, the road kills are also examples of the sacrifice of the natural world to the wheels of progress, that is, ecological manifestos. But on an even more basic level, the paintings represent a dislocated horizon, for the artist has lowered his gaze from the distant vista to the immediate and small. Not only that, but he has also given unexpected attention to an animal carcass, something

more often considered at least ugly, if not horrifying. He has raised the subject to a sublime level, crossing the horizon that habitually restricts our sense of beauty.



Figure 28 William Perehudoff, AC-62-5, 1962
Acrylic on canvas
152.5 x 178 cm
Reproduced by permission of Catherine Fowler.

Recently I stopped in the Frances Morrison Library and stared up at the rather awkwardly placed Perehudoff paintings in the stairway. I have been attracted to his hard-edged horizontal paintings (see Figure 28) since high school art class, when I tried to emulate them. (It's not as easy to make a striped canvas as some suggest.) It is unavoidable that this format somehow refers to the prairie horizon, but how exactly? Because the picture seems to contain nothing but a series of horizons there is no dominant one. How can there be more than one horizon? The roughly alternating pattern of warm and cool colors creates a kind of shimmering effect, especially as the eye travels up and then down again, searching for the true single reality. The vertical movement of the eye does in fact create an implied perpendicular, a vertical axis that corresponds to an ascent through multiple dimensions or levels of being.

William Perehudoff (1919–) speaks little and writes less, but in an artist's statement from a 1961 exhibition at the Saskatoon Art Centre he wrote, "there is a special beauty, and spiritual mystery in each tiny segment that goes to create the whole." According to Nancy Tousley's reconstruction, he went on to say:

The flower petal, the blade of grass and tiny insect are "the things that have captured my imagination and forced me to take the infinitesimal, the minute and expand it far beyond its normality ... by utilizing the artist's tools of colour, space and shape" in order to approach "the turbulence, excitement and greatness" engendered by "the complete vastness of nature." (Tousley 1993, 25)

The mystery of creation is certainly a kind of horizon beyond which even the most sophisticated microbiologists, geneticists and anthropologists cannot pass. In this reference to greatly exaggerated scale as a way of expressing the immensity of the thing, I am reminded of one of the stories of the young King Arthur in T.H. White's *Once and Future King*. Merlin causes Arthur to be temporarily transformed into a variety of other creatures so that he can see the world from their perspective, if even briefly—so that he can empathize with them (White 1958). In one such episode he becomes an ant. Perehudoff mentions in the same artist's statement the sense of "puniness in relation to nature." Perhaps this is a horizon of scale and of origins—we can only see a certain range of sizes and a certain span of time, however great these may become. Eliade offers an interpretation of this quest to penetrate the structure of the world by shrinking down to a size that can slip between its parts:

We are witnessing a desperate effort on the part of the artist to free himself of the "surface" of things and to penetrate into matter in order to lay bare its ultimate structures. To abolish form and volume, to descend into the interior of substance while revealing its secret or larval modalities—these are not, according to the artist, operations undertaken for the purpose of some sort of objective knowledge; they are ventures provoked by his desire to grasp the deepest meaning of his plastic universe. (Eliade, *Symbolism, the Sacred and the Arts* 1986, 83)

Otto Rogers made a similar observation during our interview:

Part of the struggle in modernism is the issue of shifting from looking at the world to looking through the world. Generations of artists have evolved from dealing primarily with the surface of nature to apprehending beyond it layers upon layers from the microscopic world to that of celestial realms. The inner reality of creation, it was imagined, was within reach. (Rogers 2010, 23)



Figure 29 Ernest Lindner, *Regeneration*, 1968
Acrylic on canvas
101.6 x 76.2 cm
Collection of the Mendel Art Gallery
Reproduced by permission of Degen Lindner.

Perehudoff typifies the modern painter in this regard, and boldly goes where the young Arthur once went before him.

It would be easy to miss the connection with the work of Perehudoff's first teacher, Ernest Lindner, whose work appears to be at another pole from that of his student. Yet both were inspired by the very small, the close-up view of the natural world. Lindner was fascinated by developments in science, as well as the study of mysticism and spirituality. Terrence Heath describes his fascination as an approach to a holographic view of the universe:

In the sixties he began to read more extensively in the literature of science. He was particularly struck by the investigations into the world of the minute and infinitesimal. The fact, for example, that enormous amounts of information about a person can be gained from the examination of a square inch of skin impressed him a great deal, and he saw that all totalities are really only particularities—the

whole may be the part. In the forest detail of ferns and fungi and in the texture of bark and leaves, he saw a wholeness where previously he had seen parts of a whole. ... What he saw in the close-up of forest growth was a pattern of basic life and he realized that all of life could be experienced at any distance. (Heath, Lindner's Forest 1983, 5)

The holographic principle, as elaborated by David Bohm in *Wholeness and the Implicate Order*, suggests that particularities are also totalities, that information about the entire cosmos is contained within its smallest part (Bohm 1981). Thus, it is possible that a meticulous enough attention to detail could lead to knowledge of the whole. I think Lindner would have loved to hear about this principle and to discuss it at one of the Saturday Night gatherings at his home. His later paintings, such as *Regeneration* (Figure 29) serve as vivid illustrations of the density and complexity of information stored in the holograph.

There are many similar Lindner paintings of the mixed debris and new growth around decaying stumps. They resulted in part from his experience at the Emma Lake Workshops where Greenberg influenced him to pursue a more frontal presentation of shallow pictorial space. One of the results of this personal innovation was that the horizon vanished along with the deeper pictorial space. But if, as Heath suggests, Lindner saw the greater universe in these stumps, then he has really substituted a far broader horizon, one that includes all living things, and as such serves as a holistic manifesto. John Climer proclaims, "The art of Ernest Lindner has become a religious art that transcends all former dogmas. It has its audience in the young who share to a large degree the new religious freedoms" (Climer 1970, 3). I was one of those young people, so I can attest to the truth of his claim. While Climer's writing about Lindner projects an overt religiosity that likely belongs more properly to the author, I know from personal experience that Lindner's paintings during the late sixties and early seventies coincided with a popular awareness, especially among the youth, of both ecological and spiritual issues, and may have been in some ways both a cause and an effect of these attitudes.

Perehudoff's sources were not as evident; his appeal to the young was due more to his radical form than to the rather obscure content. Of course it is also possible that Perehudoff's stripes derive from neither the horizon nor any other part of the landscape,

but from the weavings of the Caucasus region where his Doukhobor family originated. As Nancy Tousley points out in a footnote to her essay, Perehudoff acquired a book on Caucasian textiles around 1969, but there were also family heirlooms such as his grandfather's sash that formed a significant part of his home environment.



Figure 30 Heather Cline, *Eventually He Took the Bus*, 2010
Acrylic, digital transfer on canvas
61 x 91.4 cm
Reproduced by permission of the artist.

This raises the issue of cultural horizons. Our perceptions are always selective and are reinforced by cultural values that literally limit what we can see, and thereby determine what we choose to depict in visual art. Perehudoff, who was keenly aware of the work of his contemporaries in the United States and elsewhere, was likely also influenced by the painting of Kenneth Noland who was painting horizontal stripes at about the same time. American abstract painters, in their turn, were influenced to an unknown extent by the earlier work of Aboriginal artists, just as European abstract artists were inspired by their “discovery” of African art. Thus, the array of cultural influences can be extremely varied, especially for an artist as curious and well informed as Perehudoff. The transfer of cultural ideas has always been at the core of human capability; it may be that this exchange has been accelerated by the forces of both imperialism and modernism. In any case, the awareness of the extensive nature of the web of cultural influences contributes to the formation of a view with a wide horizon.

There is yet another meaning for the word “horizon” and another aspect of prairie paintings that corresponds to it. In soil science, a distinct layer of soil that has been deposited over a certain period of time is called a horizon. Paintings are also built up in layers, and thus consist of a number of material horizons that may similarly indicate corresponding layers of time. Heather Cline is one artist who tinkers with “pictorial time,” as we came to call it during an inspiring conversation in her cozy back-yard studio, which she built herself. Cline explained how she began her paintings by adhering a layer of clippings from newspapers and magazines, advertising, and old photographs to establish a temporal bed upon which to build her picture (see Figure 30), as she describes:

The easiest metaphor related to landscape is that it’s about a distance between things, so I think I’m often using landscape as a message, almost as a metaphor for a passage through time. ... So process-wise, these pieces have all sorts of pictures layered underneath about, in that case about my Dad, so there’s kind of images from him from all different times of his life, but most of them have gotten all covered up. So if you spend time with the work, you can start to see them, and there’s that powerful tool of nostalgia that you get from photographic images. ... I layer up about three or four or five different layers of images in my works. So for me there’s literally a passage through visually, as well as metaphorically. ... Jack Anderson made a very great statement, I thought, about the images creating a flow of time and event without the viewer being able to really pinpoint where it is. But having that sense of flow ...

Sounds like instead of trying to depict pictorial space, you’re trying to depict pictorial time.

Yeah, I think so. ... for me, I’m really intrigued with creating a kind of false, illusionary space on the surface of a painting, and then the closer you get, literally, the more it falls apart, as other layers become revealed underneath. (Cline 2010, 21-2)

The numerous transparent layers of acrylic paint that result in Cline’s final image admit guarded views of the earlier layers beneath. The effect is somewhat like looking through the painting surface back in time to a prior episode in the same location.

Grant McConnell has a different way of traveling in time. He starts with a sheet of rough spruce plywood, made from trees that grew at the edge of the prairie. The life of these trees likely spanned most of the settlement period, and therefore witnessed the very history that is the subject of his work. He then begins a long process of dribbling bright

liquid paint down from the upper edge of the panel in strings that form the warp of a weaving (see Figure 31). At intervals he begins to place the figures: horses, buildings, wagons, dogs and chickens in clearings and along rivers. These are like the weft threads. Then he places more drips, and more figures, continuing to apply layer after layer, building up a history of images partly obscured and stories partly told. To behold one of his completed paintings is like peering through the mists of time, past the shimmering ghosts and through the waves of temporal distortions. McConnell's paintings allow us to peer, however briefly, beyond the horizon of history.

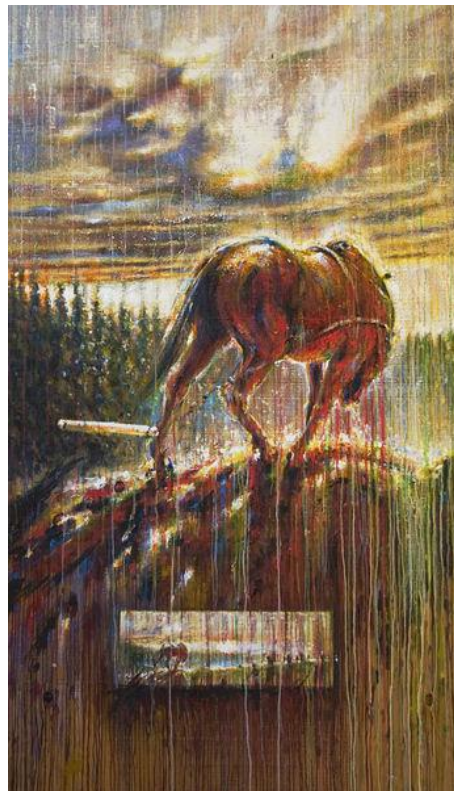


Figure 31 Grant McConnell, *Bent Straight*, 2006
Acrylic on wood
205.7 x 121.9 cm
Reproduced by permission of the artist.

In McConnell's studio, where we met for the interview, there were a number of beginnings of small paintings on the walls and a full bookshelf where we sat. Elsewhere there were shelves loaded with other objects, tables crowded with things too various to

classify. The place seemed full and used. As in many of the interviews, once I began to speak, there was no further need to pose questions: the talk just began to flow. Grant has a lot to say, some of it difficult to understand at first, both because he likes to parenthesize and because he is truly poetic, and finds surprising metaphorical ways to describe things (like Group of Seven titles being “sutured” on to Ruth Cuthand’s drawings).

McConnell moved to the University of Saskatchewan from Mount Allison University primarily to study with Otto Rogers:

Otto Rogers came through Mount A. as a visiting artist, and what he had to say was ... the seriousness and respect that he demanded of us looking at his work, and at the life of the artist ... and just the way that he described back notions of landscape and land and inspiration, and, largely within this kind of spiritual window that he was looking through, and the architectonics ... He would relate that to this kind of a spiritual matrix, if I can look at it in that way, and find an order to make a painting through ... which made perfect sense to me ... I’d pay homage to Otto for what I took from that. (McConnell 2010, 7;3)

Whatever it was that McConnell learned from Rogers, it was not a similarity of style or content; if it was “an order to make a painting through,” it was not a formula. Their work is very different, but it shares an extraordinarily high level of excellence, and a potency that profoundly stirs the deep yearnings of the viewer. My guess is that the “order” McConnell speaks of is precisely the correspondence between levels of being that Rogers described in our interview:

Why do people love waterfalls? Is it because they seem to be a part of one’s DNA? Within one’s own state of being exists a strong attachment to the movement of the waterfall as if echoing the movements of life; a continuous coming to the edge, to a limitation, and then passing over it. This is a process by which our previous reality is not lost but transformed. Thus we see in the process of nature a relationship to humanity’s creativity, a harmony between the world of nature and the life of the intellect. (Rogers 2010, 12)

Painting, because it is the creation of a rational soul, is by its nature a reflection of the divine, just as it is a reflection of nature, as well as a reflection of that human soul. There is a resonance that crosses a metaphysical horizon. In McConnell’s temporal weaving, we find a correspondence between the historical incident or scene, the objects depicted as

symbols, the painting as a locus or portal that admits our searching intellect, the mind and hand of the artist, and the gaze of the viewer. As we sift through the archaeological layers of the painting there is a sense of resonance due to these correspondences, an identification that creates links across time.



Figure 32 Robert Christie, *The Past, the Present and the Future*, 2011
Acrylic on Canvas
182.9 x 181.6 cm
Reproduced by permission of the artist.

This is not to diminish the more political and historical aspects of McConnell's painting. Indeed, the images are rich enough to contain a broad spectrum of human concerns, even including, in *Bent Straight*, a labouring draft horse that captures the artist's momentary feeling of isolation and exhaustion. In his well-known piece, *We Live on Barren Land*, he provides a lasting metaphor for the predicament of all Canadian artists. McConnell testified, in our interview, to the value of looking at art and art history from more than one perspective, looking at land and the landscape through complex, overlapping horizons of the spiritual, the aesthetic and the political.

We want to be recognized for having ideas that rub up against each other. Sometimes it's an abrasive coming-together. Sometimes it's a fruitful, positive ... And not that abrasion isn't good ... And that's something that, for artists, I think is healthy. ... Landscape is one way that we've come to understand land. And I think my practice, probably, has even more of a specific historical overlay. ... And that has the political in it, and it has the formal. Formal, political: this kind of matrix that makes up the artwork. It's there in probably my own work and I think a little bit more about the historical or the political than other artists you referred to earlier, but I don't see myself as being separate from that tradition here. (McConnell 2010, 2-3)

A few weeks ago I attended the opening of Robert Christie's most recent exhibition. Until that day, although I knew that Christie was an important painter, and I had the greatest respect for him as an educator and authority on prairie painting, I confess that I had not been truly moved by his work since I first saw it when I was in high school. At that time he was teaching at Aden Bowman Collegiate, where one of my friends, who was his student, introduced me to his "bird" paintings. These were rapidly executed layers of acrylic on paper, shimmering arabesques of multi-coloured symbols repeated over the entire picture plane. They spoke to me of passionate energy and escape, transcendence. Since then, Christie's paintings have seemed to me rather cerebral and difficult to access. But these newest offerings (see Figure 32) are possibly the most accomplished examples of his considerable expertise. Still present is the rigorously balanced geometry and the almost mathematical colour relationships, but added to these two-dimensional qualities, there is now a mystifying depth of accumulated layers. Huge areas of the ample canvasses are covered and recovered with layer upon layer of paint, obscuring most, but never all of the earlier strata. The layers are built up to a physical thickness that sometimes peels back revealing a tantalizing glimpse of what lies beneath. There is an almost palpable archaeology that the viewer must undertake in an attempt to discover the history of the place—for each painting marks a different location like a monument. Many of the works, such as *Spring Thaw* and *Red Development* also exhibit horizontal layering in their composition, reinforcing the archaeological reference. If these paintings do not directly confront the historical conflicts that still resonate in the prairies, they certainly encompass far more as a kind of mystical poetry both personal and universal. There is an unmistakable relationship, not only with the modern mysticism of

Mondrian, but with the parfleche paintings and with the work of Bob Boyer, in the highly individual renovation of a long-lasting tradition of prairie painting.

One of the most prevalent horizons on our planet is the division between the watery depths and the atmosphere. I was pondering this horizon by the koi pond in my back yard, staring at the reflections on the dancing waves, somewhat mesmerized, seeing now the flashing fish below the surface, now the sky above, and wondering why so many of the truly significant, most memorable moments of my life have been associated with water. Sitting on the beach listening to the lapping waves at sunset, or in a boat feeling the undulations of the ever-moving surface, or swimming and sensing the permeability of the water's horizon. These were moments of holiness, when I directly experienced something inexpressible, something from beyond that touched my core. As a teen I played on the sandbars in the Saskatchewan River, and felt that same something like a baptism.

I'm reminded of a story about a dragonfly that began its life as a nymph at the bottom of a pond. It gradually became aware that the other nymphs, one by one, would inevitably feel compelled to climb one of the pond plants to the surface where it would then vanish. One day it came to pass that this particular nymph also ascended and passed the horizon. It was dazzled by the intense light and amazed at the enormous space, and began to miraculously fly and soar through the new world. Suddenly it realized that it needed to tell the others below about the beauty of this world and the answer to the mystery, and it dived down, but could not pass the surface. After repeated efforts, it came to understand that even if it were able to return, no one would recognize it much less believe its tale.

There is a long tradition of painting the surface of water: the vastness and power of the ocean, the turbulence of the rushing stream, the slow progress of the wide river, and the reflections of trees in the sheltered pond. Greg Hardy contributes to this tradition, as does Dorothy Knowles. Knowles's familiar view of the shore of Emma Lake adjacent to the Kenderdine Campus shows a near-perfect mirroring, but on close inspection reveals significant differences between the upper world and its reflection. In Hardy's work, the reflections predominate over any visual penetration of the surface, yet the result

still indicates two levels of existence: the “water” world never exactly matches the “aerial” world for they are distinct realms. The word “reflection” has come to connote deep introspection of the kind that we all experience by the water, and deep introspection is akin to prayer.

The surface of the water in the painting is also a reiteration of the painting surface itself. It is a partially permeable membrane that selectively allows the passage of light from one realm to the other, while reflecting the remainder. Like the jar at the center of McConnell’s *Athabasca Waters*, it both conceals what is hidden within, and reveals what is reflected from above. Thus, it is both membrane and mirror, like the painting. As such, the reflection painting is both a passage to the next level, like the mandala discussed in Chapter One, and a mirror of the self, the one who seeks passage. As Bahá’u’lláh says in *The Hidden Words*, “Turn thy sight unto thyself, that thou mayest find Me standing within thee ...” (HW I:13). Turning within is a way of reaching across that horizon, and the painting of the reflected world is a reminder of the desire to do so: it mirrors our metaphysical circumstances.

The remarkable painting (Figure 2) found on a vertical rock face on the north shore of Black Bear Island Lake in the Churchill River system is likely one of the oldest paintings from this part of the world. Tim Jones, who did a major survey of the Churchill River paintings in 1981, estimates that it could be 200 years old, or possibly much older. It is one of about 70 similar paintings found in the province, all executed with a similar iron oxide ochre pigment and given remarkable permanence by the addition of a binder possibly made from the inner membrane of the swim bladder of sturgeon or other fish (Jones 1981, 52-5).

This particular painting is unusual in its extent and complexity, all the figures apparently executed together in a single unified composition (Ibid 21). Jones interviewed a number of Aboriginal residents about the paintings, and with their help confirmed some of the technical details of the execution. But, unsurprisingly, no explanation of their significance was offered. With neither expertise nor authority, I would like to offer an interpretation of the visual elements of the painting, without pretense of understanding

the religious or cultural significance. May I be forgiven for my impertinence, for it is surely something sacred.

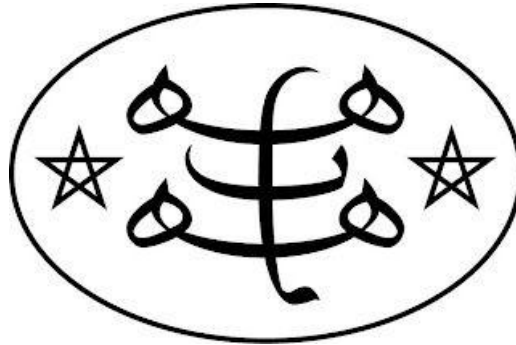


Figure 33 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Ring stone symbol, ca. 1905

Free Bahá'í Clip Art

<http://freebahaiclipart.blogspot.com/2007/10/ringstone-symbol.html>

Accessed March 14, 2012.

Among all the paintings found along the Churchill, this is the only one that seems to portray a sort of pictorial space, not illusionistic, but schematic or symbolic. It is definitely divided by a line that forms a three-sided open enclosure, and divided again by a much smaller, but similar enclosure. My feeling is that this represents a sort of metaphysical horizon, delineating this phenomenal world from the spirit realm. One of the figures above the line and within the enclosure appears to be a Thunderbird, a sky spirit, sending a streak of lightning downward. As well, there is another winged creature above a Medicine Wheel, possibly representing an elevated view of the entire cosmos. The human figures below the line are associated with recognizable human artefacts: a pipe and rattles. The pipe is symbolic of the pact between humans and the spirit world, while the rattles are instruments for summoning the spirits. While I hesitate to suggest it, the smaller enclosure with its minimal symbol of transcendence could actually be a reference to a Supreme Being. As such, it is a sort of map of the cosmos as well as a representation of the act of prayer.

The overall scheme bears a resemblance to a Bahá'í symbol (Figure 33) which represents three levels of existence including our own material world, that of the realm of transcendent spirits and that of the Absolute, with an indication of the possibility of

communication between them by way of the vertical line. Obviously, this is pure speculation and perhaps fancy. But since I've come this far, I'd like to compare it to another painting that looks to the horizon.

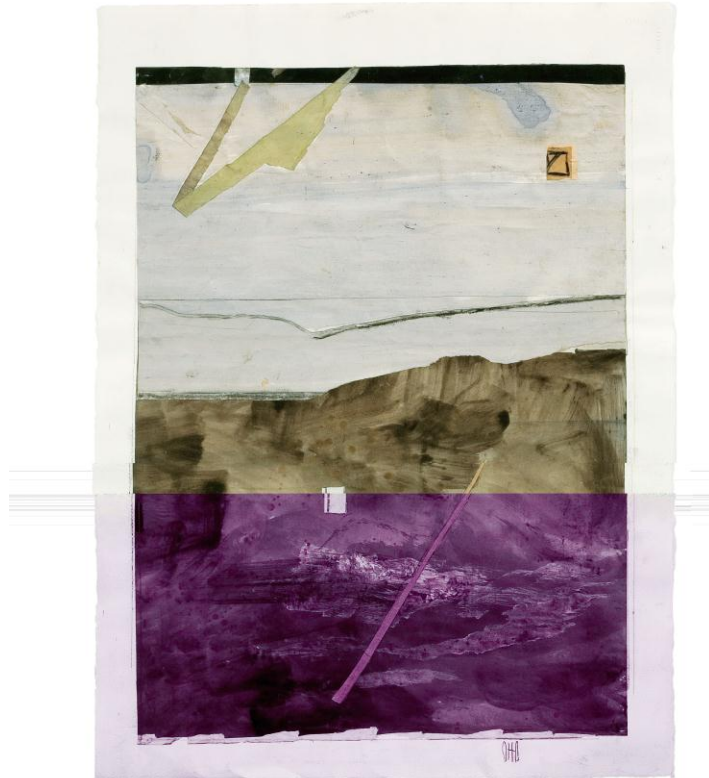


Figure 34 Otto Rogers, *This World and One Invisible*, 2006
Acrylic on paper
76.2 x 55.9 cm
Collection of the artist
Reproduced by permission.

Many of Otto Rogers's paintings seem to open into enormous, light-filled spaces. They are not modeled after the physical world, even though they sometimes resemble it, but refer metaphorically to a transcendent realm, a greater world that is normally veiled from us. This is the meaning of the horizon in this case: the point beyond which we cannot perceive. In *This World and One Invisible* (Figure 34), a work that includes collaged and drawn elements as well as painted ones, the picture is divided into two (or more) distinct zones divided by a horizon. Each is populated by elemental figures which

appear to be widely separated from each other in space, yet somehow related, whether in communication or through action upon each other. The long, slender element indicates a vertical movement, roughly aimed at the very distant-looking heavenly body above (possibly analogous to the rattle-playing humans), while the folded paper element at the top of the composition is clearly directing some kind of force downward, not unlike the Thunderbirds. The resemblance to the geometry of the rock painting may be fortuitous, or it may be that both correspond to an archetypal structure that transcends time and culture.

Black Elk, the visionary and healer of the Oglala Sioux, tells his story near the end of his long life. After a great vision as a nine year old boy, he is thereafter more or less aware at all times of another level of existence, and on several occasions travels to the other realm. In order to make use of the powers bestowed upon him in these visionary experiences, he must enact them for his people in a kind of grand ceremonial theatre, which he must orchestrate. The first time he does this he experiences a moment of enlightenment:

Then suddenly, as I sat there looking at the cloud, I saw my vision yonder once again—the tepee built of cloud and sewed with lightning, the flaming rainbow door and, underneath, the Six Grandfathers sitting, and all the horses thronging in their quarters; and also there was I myself upon my bay before the tepee. I looked about me and could see that what we then were doing was like a shadow cast upon the earth from yonder vision in the heavens, so bright it was and clear. I knew the real was yonder and the darkened dream of it was here. (Neihardt 1972, 142)

Otto Rogers, in his essay *The Intelligent Exercise of the Rational Soul*, describes the function of the artist as the ability to recognize and exploit this correspondence. What is usually taken to be the “real” world is revealed to be a mere sign of something far greater.

I have always felt that the most fruitful relationship the artist can have with nature is to perceive the physical world as metaphor containing within itself countless other metaphors. An eleventh-century mystic wrote that the visible world was made to correspond to the world invisible and that there is nothing in this world but that which is a symbol of something in that other world. (Rogers, Otto Donald Rogers 2007, 157)

If the natural, phenomenal world is the metaphor, then the painting, at its best, is a potentially transformative reminder of this state of affairs. The painting points to the

greater, spiritual reality through its own materiality, its own relationships, just as the earth does through its own complex physicality. In this way, the successful painting, under the right circumstances, permits the viewer to see beyond the horizon of this world.

In our long and fascinating conversation over the course of three days, Rogers emphasized this apparent division between earth and heaven and the role of art in trying to connect them.

We are animals in a sense, and we have a material kind of pursuit, but at the same time, we're trying to call down another reality, an intellectual reality, a spiritual reality... we're trying to make a bridge between the two. So, like Mohammed said, "music is a ladder between earth and heaven," and that's a very good analogy, and I think that's basically what art is. It's an attempt to make a bridge between these two worlds! (Rogers 2010, 18)

The distinction between levels is strictly a function of the limits of our current state of awareness. As Rogers insisted in an interview with George Moppett, "There is no separation between the two. We only manufacture the separation. It's our own limited vision that tends to say there's a spiritual world and a physical world" (Rogers, Otto Donald Rogers 2007, 11). "Calling down another reality" sounds like a very apt description of the action that is taking place in the rock painting above, as well as in Black Elk's horse dance ceremony. The horizon in all three cases represents a limit to be transcended, a world boundary, and the painting (or dance) is a talisman for crossing the boundary.

Like artists everywhere, prairie painters are indeed affected by their environment: they choose from it the most potent metaphor for their deeply felt spiritual yearnings. The horizon, in prairie paintings, is much more than a re-creation of an accident of geography. It's continuing presence in paintings serves to express that which is distant, promising, impending or unattainable; the interface between the actual and the potential, the manifest and the hidden. Even in the most literal depictions of the plains with the great luminous sky above, the horizon is more than a convenient division: it is a metaphor, a poetic reference to the existence of multiple levels of existence in a mysterious and complex world. The divisions of the painted surface, whether literal, symbolic,

conceptual or physical, are examples of the archetypal sacred geometry used to mark the point of contact between worlds, and to sanctify the numinous experience.

Chapter Three: Axis Mundi

As a young adolescent, I spent a great deal of time at the family cabin at Emma Lake. I understand the appeal of the forest and lake to prairie dwellers. The many artists who have visited and painted Emma Lake were responding, no doubt, to the luxuriance, the shade, the abundance of water and also to the illusory idea of untouched wilderness. But there is also evidence in the paintings of a direct response to the verticality of the tree and its power as an archetype. The roots of the tree penetrate deep into the unknowable depths of the earth, its branches ascend into the heavens. From the surface where we stand, it appears to be a living conduit that joins heaven and earth, a means of ascent. In many cultures the World Tree stands at the center of creation, the mythical origin and source of knowledge. Joan M. Vastokas, in her essay "The Shamanic Tree of Life," argues that the archetypal tree is a universal symbol.

The tree and its intimately associated concept of a "centre" are archetypes of fundamental importance to the ideological, artistic, and spiritual life not only of native Americans, but of the whole of humankind. ... Basic to most religious and ideological systems, and standing at the heart of shamanistic ideology and iconography, is the conception of a sacred tree growing at the very mid-point of the earth. This World Tree, moreover, is interchangeable with the idea of a post, pillar, or axis positioned at the centre of the Universe, so that the World Tree is also a Cosmic Axis. (Vastokas 1977, 93-4)

As Vastokas suggests, the World Tree assumes many forms: the Tree of Knowledge at the center of the Garden of Eden, the totem pole, the sacred mountain, the skyscraper or a column of smoke. In "The Calabash of the Ruffled Feathers," Johannes Wilbert equates the sacred rattle and the World Tree as expressions of a vital link between the levels of existence: "... the sacred Rattle of the Ruffled Feathers, held ritually like an axis mundi or world tree in upright position by the ascending shaman-priest, marks the very center and axis of the cosmology and ideational universe of the Warao [Indigenous people of Venezuela]" (Wilbert 1977, 61). Jacob's dream of a ladder joining heaven and earth with angels ascending and descending is another example of the vertical ascent as a means of communication between levels of the world. In Black Elk's vision, he is taken to the "high and lonely center of the earth" (Neihardt 1972, 22) where he beholds:

... a bright red stick that was alive, and as I looked it sprouted at the top and sent forth branches, and on the branches many leaves came out and murmured and in the leaves the birds began to sing. And then for just a little while I thought I saw beneath it in the shade the circled villages of the people and every living thing with roots or legs or wings, and all were happy. (Ibid 24)

In this remarkably detailed vision, the living Tree originates, contains and sustains the world and all its creatures.



Figure 35 Robert Hurley, *Untitled (summer)*, 1952
Watercolour on card
32.6 x 39.4 cm
Collection of Dr. Jessie Caldwell, Saskatoon
Reproduced by permission of Douglas & McIntyre, Vancouver.

In an audio recording of a tour of his reinstallation of the Canadian Gallery at the Art Gallery of Ontario, Gerald McMaster describes the first thematic section of the exhibition, “Axis Mundi,” from which I have taken the title for this chapter, as the juxtaposition of different cultural perspectives. The very diverse works displayed together are all examples of the archetype of the vertical passage linking “the upper world of the Thunderbird and the lower world of the Mishibizhiw [‘underwater panther’]” as suggested by the pair of beaded Anishinabe pouches (McMaster, *Art and Ideas: The New*

Canadian Installations 2009). In Tom Thomson's *West Wind*, the forces of the atmosphere contend with the waters of the lake, the two realms visually spanned by the lone pine. Emily Carr's *Indian Church*, hanging next to the pouches, presents a Christian axis in the form of the church steeple, although in Carr's depiction, it is dwarfed by the surrounding forest.

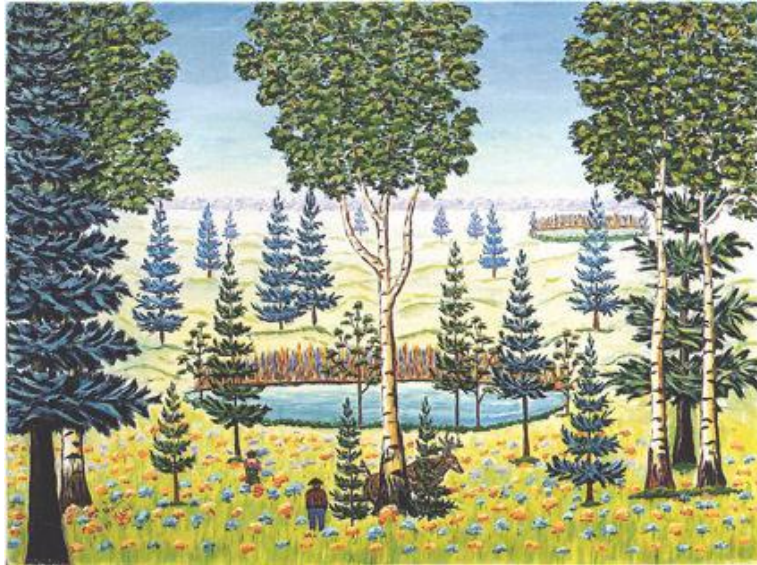


Figure 36 Roland Keevil, *Untitled (man, woman and deer in a meadow with ponds)*, 1962

Oil on canvas board

45.7 x 60.9 cm

Collection of Lynn Munkley and Christopher Thomas, Toronto

Reproduced by permission of Lynn Munkley.

How is the World Tree represented in prairie painting? The sacred geometry established in the first two chapters includes a center and radial symmetry within a surrounding circle, and two or more levels. The World Tree connects these levels through the center along a vertical axis, or *Axis Mundi*. While this axis is almost never explicit in prairie painting, it is almost always implied. For example, in the Churchill River rock paintings (Figure 2), the human figures on the lower level direct their rattles and their prayers upward, while the Thunderbirds on the upper level send lightning downward toward them. In McConnell's *Athabasca Waters* (Figure 3) the picture plane is divided along a vertical axis that is repeated and emphasized by the rising column of smoke that seems to emanate from the jar. In a prairie landscape such as Fenton's *Allowance* (Figure

22), or even more so in Hurley's untitled watercolour (Figure 35), the expanse of sky draws the eye of the viewer upward, accentuating the relationship between the earthly and heavenly realms, and mimicking the action of prayer. This vertical movement of the eye of the viewer is a natural response to the prairie landscape; the implied perpendicular to the horizon line is an integral part of the structure of much prairie painting. Even the insistent hard-edged horizontal stripes of many of Perehudoff's canvasses, as already discussed, through their pulsating energy, engender an invisible vertical counterpoint.

The world tree also stands at the center of the garden in Roland Keevil's captivating view of the prairie as paradise (Figure 36). Once again I disagree with Dan Ring's assumption that this is a nostalgic yearning for a time or place of the past, "an idyllic past complemented by technology" (Ring, *Roland Keevil: A Retrospective* 1988, 16). Keevil was a successful Saskatoon businessman who enjoyed the fruits of his good fortune and had full confidence in the development of the city that he portrayed most often in his untutored paintings. Ring accurately identifies the theme of Keevil's work as "material progress and Arcadian beauty wrought from a hostile landscape" (Ibid 13). His success and confidence are not consistent with a yearning for the past: Keevil is envisioning the future. Here is a world put in order, or perhaps returned to an original, Edenic order, according to the sacred geometry. At the center stands the axis mundi, the fullness of its creative force evident in the radiating array of trees and flowers that surround it; the round mirror of the pond is symmetrically divided by the axis; the human figures stand at the base of the tree, at the location of the hierophany, as Eliade would have it, that is, at the point where the sacred has made itself known. All attention, all energies are directed upward in a vertical pulse that is echoed in the almost electric conifers, the buoyant flowers and the contemplative posture of the figures. As Ring says, this is an icon, a picture of an ideal transcendent world, or as Eliade calls it, "sacred space."

In the work of two Bahá'í artists we find a variation of the archetype of the tree. These works refer to the "Sadrat'ul-muntahá," or "the tree beyond which there is no passing," literally a boundary marker, but figuratively the absolute limit of understanding. By extension, the Sadrat'ul-muntahá also refers to the manifestation of God as the one who stands at the limit of understanding and completes the journey beyond it on our

behalf. Eve Kotyk, a former student of Otto Rogers, works in encaustic and creates what would almost seem to be sensitive portraits of trees if they did not stand in such a diaphanous, ethereal world (Figure 37). There is really nothing else in the picture but the tree, scarcely enough solid earth to support it; even the atmosphere is too rarified to sustain life. This is a visionary tree at the extreme reaches of mortal experience. Kotyk recalls from her childhood in rural Saskatchewan a time when she felt rejected by her schoolmates:



Figure 37 Eve Kotyk, *The Muse, Looking to History*, 2007
Encaustic on panel
60.9 x 45.6 cm
Reproduced by permission of the artist.

Where I found solace was to go out to the community pasture, and just smell the smells and see the sights. And in that bigness of it, was this overwhelming thing that was kind of God. And it often brought me to tears. (Kotyk 2010, 2)

I know exactly what she means, having experienced an “overwhelming thing” on numerous occasions throughout my life. This is the quintessential religious experience,

not theoretical or dogmatic, but visceral. It converts the profane moment to sacred time and the mundane location to sacred space. Perhaps Kotyk's trees are markers of the numinous experience. I recall finding huge old poplar trees standing alone on the prairie during my boyhood explorations, witnesses of untold changes, survivors of how many trials? They were significant markers by any measure, and potent symbols.



Figure 38 Garry Berteig, *The Divine Lote-Tree*, 2004

Media, ink on paper

55.9 x 76.2 cm

Reproduced by permission of the artist.

Garry Berteig (1946–), a Saskatoon artist, originally from Moose Jaw, who studied with Otto Rogers and later moved to Fort McMurray to become head of the art department at Keyano College, also depicts trees in both his paintings and his ink drawings. In *The Divine Lote-Tree* (Figure 38) the location is just as ethereal as Kotyk's, but the tree is less expressive of vertical ascent and more of a reference to the Burning Bush through which God addressed Moses. Although rendered in black, the bush seems to barely contain the opposing inwardly concentrated gravitational force and the explosive dynamism that could sustain a perpetual fire. The hierophany is celebrated and elaborated by the penning of sacred verses in various parts of the drawing.

There is another way that the vertical axis is evident in prairie paintings: the elevated perspective. When I went to visit Berteig in Fort McMurray, he took me to one of his favorite places as a way of demonstrating his reasons for staying. We drove to the edge of the city (with a surprising population of 100,000) and set out on a muddy trail through the gold and red trees to a place that he calls Runner's Point. He described it during the interview:

Runners Place is a vantage point that sits probably 100 meters above the Horse River, which leads into the Athabasca. And from Runner's Place, you can see both rivers and a kind of a bowl of cliffs that, on one hand, are so steep that nothing grows on them, and you see oil oozing out of them in warm weather, and a canopy of trees that stretches out about roughly a kilometre in a semi-circular way. And the access to Runner's Point is along this margin of the cliffs, ... and there's just an area of about, I'd say 2 and a half meters, by a meter wide, that you can sit, and take in this view, and it has an effect on one of being almost airborne, and hovering above this active landscape, that is always moving in terms of wind or light on the waters, or things happening with the clouds and light. Movement across the surfaces. (Berteig 2010, 1)

Here we sat in silence for some time in response to the wonders below us, looking down on the birds as they shifted from tree to tree, and on the spectacle of countless golden leaves dancing back and forth across the valley. I asked Berteig what he thought of the idea of an elevated viewpoint as a signifier of dominance.

An elevated perspective ... can also be a place of detachment, of rising above your own problems, let's say, or above yourself. To be able to be open to, perhaps, a greater reality. ... It's more rarefied than dominant. You know, there's no sense that you can dominate that place. One reference that I have is from ... Chinese painting, where the elevated viewpoint was one of the considerations of scholarly painters. And it had nothing to do with dominance. It had everything to do with man's miniscule condition, in the face of the immensity of nature. (Berteig 2010, 2)

My feelings at Runner's Point were those that I have returned to over and over through the course of my life, whenever I sit still in the forest or the prairie or the river valley or on the mountainside, a feeling of powerful peace, trust, wonder, something like ecstasy. This is what we spoke of. This view of the natural world is not one of sentimentality, romance or trendy environmental concern, nor is it a political act or one of domination.

This is a viewpoint from which an artist may draw inspiration, an awareness of another level of being.



Figure 39 Allen Sapp, *Pow-Wow Drummers*, 1989
Acrylic on canvas
91.4 x 152.4 cm
Collection of the Assiniboia Gallery, Regina
Reproduced by permission of the Public Guardian and Trustee.

There are a number of rather stunning examples of the use of an elevated perspective in prairie painting. Some of the most remarkable are found in the paintings of Cree artist Allen Sapp (1928–), who locates the center of the world in his childhood home on Red Pheasant Reserve, near North Battleford where he now resides. In *Pow-Wow Drummers* (Figure 39) he reinforces this center with an almost perfect mandala geometry in the circle of drummers: the round drum head, the radiating lines of the drum sticks caught in mid-motion, the intently engaged players with their hats and feathers all aimed inward at the same focal point, all visual representations of the concentrated energy that is being summoned for the dance. This is a mandala in both form and function, for it draws the viewer in, compelled by the hypnotic rhythm to cross the threshold into the painter's vision. The limited bright palette and even application also recall the parfleche paintings. But the most striking feature of the painting is the perspective, looking down on the group from directly above. Similarly, in *A Big Pow-Wow* (Figure 40) the viewer looks down from a considerable height, at least several meters, on a scene of numerous figures dancing and two circles of drummers. The

perspective is not perfectly even: for example, we seem to be more directly above the drummers than the dancers, who appear more obliquely. The dancers also appear to be larger than the drumming figures, but in spite of these shifts, the foreshortening of the complex movements and the intricate detailing of the costumes suggests that the painter must have carefully observed his models or worked from numerous sketches or photographs. However, Sapp works exclusively from memory. As Dean Bauche, long time director of the Sapp Gallery writes:

Although it is difficult to describe in words, Allen seems to be gifted with a photographic memory. He not only paints the past but he almost seems to return in his mind to that very situation that he wishes to impart upon the canvas. It is for this reason we see into Allen's paintings from the perspective of a child. Each experience he paints contains almost every significant detail from that moment and almost every moment he paints was seen in his childhood. (Bauche c.1989, 30)



Figure 40 Allen Sapp, *A Big Pow-Wow*, 1988

Acrylic on canvas

61 x 91.4 cm

Private Collection

Reproduced by permission of the Public Guardian and Trustee.

Bauche relates how Sapp once described a painting of two sleighs passing each other on the road by recounting the entire conversation that had taken place. Bauche goes on to describe a significant instance of Sapp's remarkable visual recall:

Possibly one of the most common and striking revelations of this recall is that many of his paintings of the inside of his grandparents' cabin are painted from the perspective of lying on a bed. This is not only revealed by the low perspective from which the canvas is obviously painted, but amazingly enough by the appearance of a cast iron rung which cuts across the corner of the foreground of the canvas so naturally that, unless pointed out, it remains unnoticed by the viewer. (Ibid)

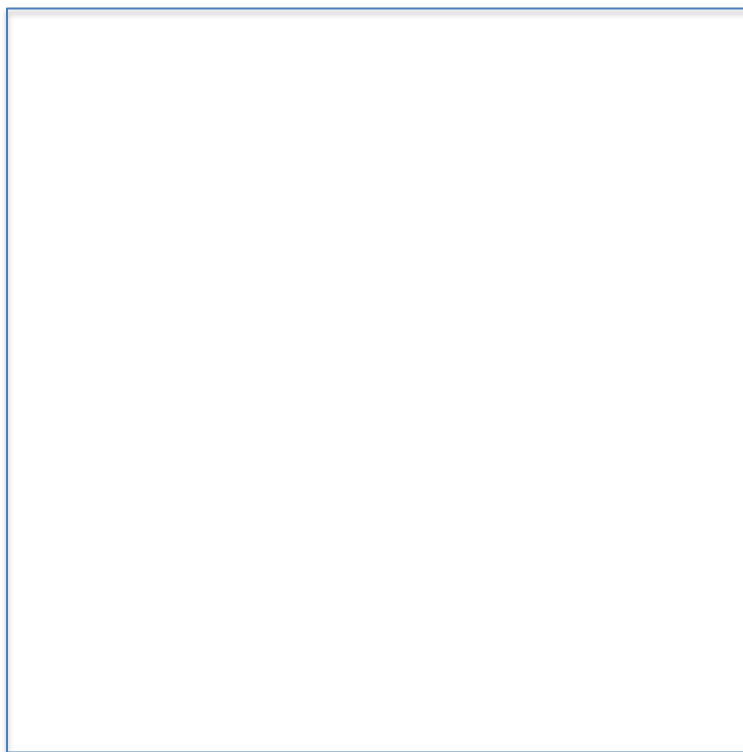


Figure 41 Bob Boyer, *I Remember Jeffe; Fernand; Her Horses and His Light*, 1992
Oil over acrylic on burlap
122 x 183.5 cm

Saskatchewan Arts Board Permanent Collection

Removed due to copyright restrictions. Excellent images of Boyer's paintings can be found in the original source: Martin, Lee-Ann. *Bob Boyer: His Life's Work*. Regina: MacKenzie Art Gallery, 2008.

If we accept that Sapp's paintings are amazingly accurate renderings of recalled visual experiences, how do we explain the elevated perspectives? Bauche suggests that the young artist loved to climb trees, as I did, but even Sapp's painting of a boy climbing a tree is done from above. In *A Big Pow-Wow* there are no trees visible in the picture, no branches crossing it in the manner of the iron bedstead. How could he have made this precise memory? Bob Boyer, in *Kiskayetum*, hints at an explanation:

Over his career he has given many paintings this unusual but visually correct perspective. It is as though the artist is floating above the scene as it is painted. ... Allen is painting the world from some dream-like perspective often described by others who could not paint their experience. (Boyer 1994, 17)

What this suggests to me is that Sapp observed this scene from outside his body, in a visionary state, then recalled his vision with characteristic accuracy. There are other similar views, such as *Taking Water Home*, *Nokum Making Bannock*, *Pow-Wow Drummers*, *Warming Up* in which the artist is definitely looking down at his subject from above, yet he could not have occupied this position in his physical body. Sapp's work is sometimes criticized for its occasional lack of painterly sophistication, but perhaps this is simply misdirected. It may be that the work is an extraordinary record of a visionary experience from a spiritual adept. Sapp's Cree name, Kiskayetum, was given to his grandmother's sister in a dream, and means, according to elders, "He Knows It," rather than "He Perceives It," which has been a common mistranslation. The difference may be an important distinction between merely seeing something and knowing it intimately through spiritual insight. As Bob Boyer writes:

Even prior to his name giving, Allen's grandmother, Maggie Soonias, noticed his abilities and encouraged him to carry on his passion for drawing and painting. Given the above, one could say that Allen was indeed traditionally gifted with a form of spiritual vision and art making. (Ibid 12)

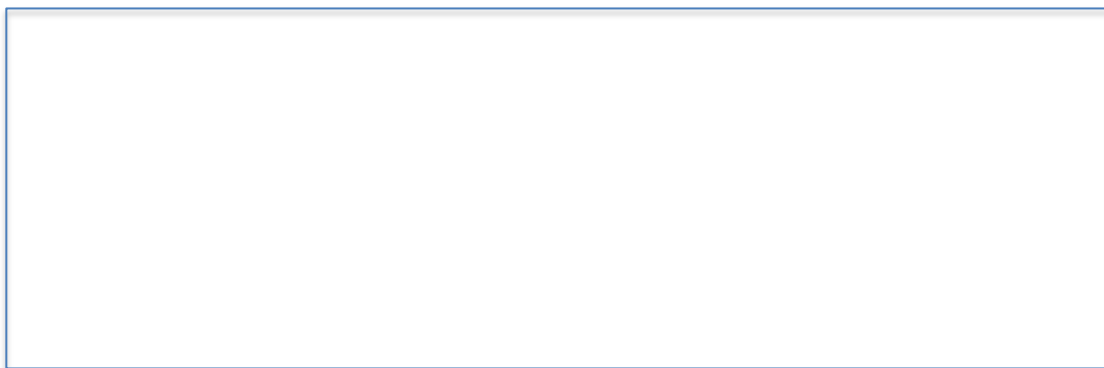


Figure 42 Bob Boyer, *F.U.S.Q. - Tanks for the Memories*, 1992

Mixed media on paper

Four sections: 112 x 77 cm (each)

Collection of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada

Removed due to copyright restrictions. Excellent images of Boyer's paintings can be found in the original source: Martin, Lee-Ann. *Bob Boyer: His Life's Work*. Regina: MacKenzie Art Gallery, 2008.

If Sapp was indeed transported to the limits of the physical realm with the frequency indicated by his abundant paintings, then he must have dwelt in a nearly continuous state of awareness of the sacred, living permanently at the center.

Boyer, who was visionary in the artistic sense, also made use of the elevated perspective in his paintings. Many are map-like in their delineation of cosmic features and forces, and can be considered as aerial views. Lee-Ann Martin describes the combination of perspectives that Boyer began to use as a result of his study of parfleche paintings:

These are among the first paintings in which the theme of place or “cosmic landscapes” would emerge. Thus, physical structures such as mountains and tipis, for example, could be presented horizontally or from an aerial view directly above the land—among other possibilities—in the upper canvas. (Martin 2008, 33)

Boyer makes reference to specific forms or typical features using a personal symbolism gleaned from a variety of cultural sources. The stepped pyramids, already mentioned in the discussion of *Grandfather Will Come Again* (Figure 6) are likely among these hybrid symbols. The mountains that often border the pictures are commonly recognizable signs. One instance of a figure viewed from directly above is the symbol at the center of both *Horses Fly Too?* and *I Remember Jeffe; Fernand; Her Horses and His Light* (Figure 41). “The bilaterally-symmetrical ‘E’ shapes represent the horse’s legs, while the central diamond shape suggests the saddle and blanket of the rider” (Ibid). Martin seems to be suggesting that this is a traditional depiction. There are other signs that are entirely personal: the erratic, organic dots and commas that are scattered over the more regular geometry in *Grandfather Will Come Again* are a complete break from the parfleche tradition, and seem to come from modern abstract painting. The rough cross shapes that populate the same painting have an ambiguous significance in this context, but make a specific reference in another painting, *F.U.S.Q.—Tanks for the Memories* (Figure 42), an “aerial view of a battleground or a schematic drawing of a battle plan” (Ibid 61). Here we also see the imported symbol of the fleur-de-lys as the banner of the aggressor.

This range of signs and symbols is embedded within a pictorial structure that exemplifies, with some variations, the sacred geometry: it emanates from a center; it is

radially symmetrical; it is divided into four quadrants and bounded by four horizons; the vertical world axis is implied by the elevated viewpoint. In Boyer's paintings we are looking down at an ordered, sacred world from a level above it, from a visionary spiritual perspective, as in the paintings of Sapp.



Figure 43 Ann Harbuz, *My Mother's Funeral*, 1979
Acrylic and pen on stretched fabric over masonite
45.0 x 60.2 cm
Collection of Joe Fafard, Regina

Removed due to copyright restrictions. Excellent images of the paintings of Ann Harbuz are to be found in the original source: Borsa, Joan. *Ann Harbuz: Inside Community, Outside Convention*. Regina: Dunlop Art Gallery, 1997.

The elevated perspective is also evident in a number of paintings by Ann Harbuz (1908-89). In *My Mother's Funeral* (Figure 43) we look down on a prairie landscape and the homes nested in it as though from a heavenly prospect, or perhaps from the viewpoint of her mother's ascending spirit. Harbuz, a Ukrainian settler who decided to paint late in life without the benefit of training, seems to share the visionary ability of Sapp, seeing within the home of her family and observing the most intimate details even from this

lofty perspective. As Joan Borsa writes in an eloquent account of her long relationship with Harbuz:

Throughout her production as a whole, a form of x-ray vision seems to be at work. We are able to see close up, inside a situation, yet the long view, the overview, remains. It is as if this view has multiple vantage points, over time and distance, providing a suspended perspective that allows us to comprehend a picture even bigger than what is portrayed. (Borsa 1997, 20)

The bigger picture that Borsa senses is the cosmos, the ordered structure of a multi-level geometry that integrates the human and the divine. The moment that Harbuz observes in *My Mother's Funeral* is also one that transcends ordinary profane time, the moment of passage to the next realm, a moment when there is an opening to the sacred that is felt by all those near. The upward gaze of the standing figure is answered by the downward slant of the rain in the coming storm, a reciprocal vector that traverses the horizon from one level of being to another.

On the rare occasions when I travel by air I always try to get a window seat. I love to gaze down over the land and watch the colours and textures shift. It is partly the fascination with the visual spectacle, and partly an opportunity to reflect on the world and our human situation within it from a detached, if privileged, perspective. During the flight to Fort McMurray to meet with Garry Berteig, looking down past the wing of the plane, I was captivated and saddened as usual by the endless square fields and roads dividing them. These gradually diminished as we moved northward and muskegs and lakes occupied more of the land. Still, every strip of dry earth was cut into smaller rectilinear patches by trails and power line cuts. As a boy I experienced the same feeling of desecration when, while riding my bike along the prairie trails, I was suddenly confronted with a fence or a highway or a new construction. I knew then that I was implicated in these invasive developments, and I had the same helpless feeling in the airplane. As I stared at the surface of the earth below, I began to become aware of an underlying structure that revealed itself in the gaps between the cultivated fields, in meandering gullies, streambeds and sloughs. It was an undulating body, solid, deep, resilient, on which the farm grid was mere tracery, a palimpsest that would fade like the phone number scrawled on the back of my hand. The deeper layers of this landscape that give

shape and support to the surface patterns will endure without fail. Seeing through the vulnerable surface I felt a sense of relief, and wondered if there could be a cultural comparison: perhaps the divisions and delineations of settlement culture are not everlasting; could there be a more enduring bedrock of Indigenous culture that may help to shape a more integrated future landscape?

Something like this is present in the remarkable encaustic by Regina artist Edward Poitras (1953–), entitled *Optional Modification* (Figure 44). The multi-layered composition is based on an aerial view or map of Regina Beach and adjacent reserve land. The work is constructed on six rough plywood panels that are layered with mostly transparent materials so that the sequence of construction can be approximately discerned. It appears that the initial design was done in graphite, then some type of blue-black stain. Perhaps acrylic paint was brushed over selected areas and lettering was applied or stenciled. Only small fragments of the lettering remain visible in the completed work, but it may be in part a selection from *Bill C-79, The Indian Act Optional Modification Act*. This proposed piece of legislation from 1996 was “criticized as an unwanted initiative, based on inadequate consultations, that ignored the recently released Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, and its authors’ caution against piecemeal reform of the Indian Act as a viable policy” (Hurley 1999). Poitras, a member of the Gordon First Nation, may be using the legislation as an object to act upon, as in Yuxweluptun’s *Shooting the Indian Act*. Upon this base are various scribbblings in graphite, or there may be an intervening layer of acrylic medium in some areas. In the town site and resort areas, numerous wood screws have been inserted in the place of dwellings. Then the encaustic, sometimes milky and transparent, sometimes tar-like, or smoky and burnt-looking, has been applied over all, with varying thickness, sometimes missing altogether. This wax layer has then been scratched, engraved and scraped, sometimes emphasizing underlying structures and features, sometimes adding new material such as a crude representation of an airplane, or various arrows that seem to direct and misdirect attention. The most significant figure, apart from the dark waters of the lake, is the menacing white downward curve of a serpent with a conspicuously forked tongue.

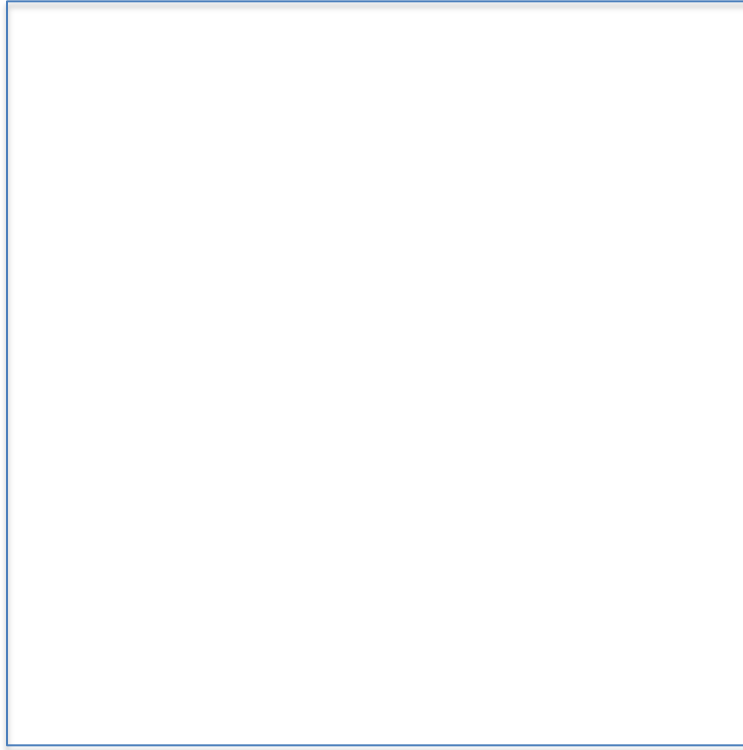


Figure 44 Edward Poitras, *Optional Modification in Six Parts*, 2001 (detail)

Encaustic on plywood

245.6 x 739.8 cm

Collection of the Mendel Art Gallery. Purchased with the assistance of the Canada Council for the Arts, the Mendel Art Gallery Foundation and the Gallery Group, 2003

Removed due to copyright restrictions.

The fascination and power of the work is in its partial obscurity, partial revelation, its multiple layers and references. It looks to me something like the landscape that I saw from the airplane: a complex layering of land and culture, some paths worn deep, scars of sudden disruption, gradual accretions and imposed structures, interweavings of a long encounter.

There was another moment on the journey, flying out of Fort McMurray in the dark, when the aircraft banked slightly and I saw the gold, silver, copper, and bronze array of lights floating on the void, and inwardly exclaimed, “God is great! He reveals His beauty everywhere, even from within the abominations of men!” The approach to Edmonton was equally breathtaking, a great mandala of light in a sea of darkness. I was reminded of the work of a young Saulteaux artist working in Saskatoon, Wally Dion (1976–). Dion works in a variety of methods and materials, his paintings sometimes

erupting into sculptural relief, as in *White Star Blanket* (Figure 45), assembled from electronic circuit boards and painted. The mandala motif is superimposed on a surface that is eerily reminiscent of a city as seen from high above, the radiating symmetry of the star and the perimeter boundary like a sheer protective quilt or a blessing cast over the city beneath. There is a distinct resemblance and a debt to Boyer in this work, another example of the complex layering of cultural paradigms and the use of the elevated perspective as a means of achieving a broader vision and a helpful distance.



Figure 45 Wally Dion, *White Star Blanket*, 2008
193 x 180.3 cm
Circuit boards, acrylic enamel paint, copper wire, steel
Photograph by Don Hall
Reproduced by permission of the artist.

Dion spoke of his influences and interests during our interview, as well as a recent shift in his focus:

My own perspective on these things. ... I haven't spent so much time on those artists [painters associated with Emma Lake] as I have on artists that you mentioned lastly. You were talking about sort of Allen Sapp, Edward Poitras, Ruth Cuthand, right up to Lori Blondeau and Adrian Stimson ... All those guys. So I'm mostly interested in those characters and the things that have happened since then, and I spent a lot of my art career looking at social relationships and sort of the whole colonial relationship, and in that sense, a lot of the work from those First Nations artists has been of great interest for me. ... And I sort of frame myself, look at, position myself within a First Nations art history timeline. You

could say, “Wally where do you position yourself with respect to Bill Perehudoff or Darrell Bell, landscape painter?” And it hasn’t even really occurred. He isn’t really on the radar within my own perception of myself and my art. ... And now, the latest latest work that I’ve done ... has been about looking into the relevance of spirituality on my own personal level. So it’s kind of funny that you mention that a lot of these artists or movements had spiritual undertones or religious undertones, because ... now that I’ve reached this age, or just this time in my life, in my career, ... my concern is more what I want to talk about, and so some of the things I want to talk about in the art today is just my own spiritual program or beliefs. (Dion 2010, 1-2)



Figure 46 Wally Dion, *Thunderbird* (detail), 2008
121.6 x 295.9 x 9.8 cm
Circuit boards, plywood, acrylic paint
Photograph by Don Hall
Reproduced by permission of the artist.

Dion’s work, like Boyer’s, combines ancient traditions with modern and post-modern influences, all subject to his personal innovation and interpretation. Like Boyer, Dion has concentrated in his paintings, drawings and sculptural installations on political themes, but is now directing his attention more toward spiritual matters. Like Boyer, he has been educated primarily in the Academy, but his influences are not limited by it; he is continuing and extending the kind of renovations begun by Boyer, in which traditional themes and motifs form the basis for bold innovations with contemporary materials and techniques. As Dion notes, these developments have been parallel to and at least partly independent of concurrent developments in Euro-Canadian painting practices, although there have undoubtedly been many instances of exchange in various directions.

In a related series of works, Dion has incorporated the image of a giant Thunderbird into the fabric of the “cityscape.” In *Thunderbird*, 2008 (Figure 46) the details of the electronic circuitry once again resemble the structures of the city to an astonishing degree. Perhaps it is no surprise that the city of our time should resemble the machinery of the computer, not to mention the inverse. What is more surprising is that Dion has portrayed the Thunderbird as a kind of giant fossil, not unlike a dinosaur, embedded within the structure of the city, a sleeping giant that might at any moment awake with unspeakable power. Dion spoke about this during our interview:

The last piece that I feel really confident or strong about ... is this piece called *Man Changing into Thunderbird: God Pray*. And this one is about coming at the end of the *Thunderbird* series ... these creatures were kind of all about the environment, really, but they were also about the First Nations culture coming back to life. ... The Thunderbird's a great avatar for what I'm talking about or what I'm living about now, because it covers so many things, like these birds are fossilized representations, within a computer circuit board. That's the medium. So it's like we're talking about fossils, we're talking about moving large amounts of land and uncovering these skeletal remains of a hugely powerful cultural ... concerns like Fort McMurray and the tar sands, and then down south now with the coal extraction projects that are underway. ... All of these concerns, they're environmental. And while I've never painted a landscape painting, this is as much about the landscape ... If you look at the Thunderbird, a lot of them look like a topographical map or a topographical representation of a city ... It's about the people, the land changing, the growth of First Nations people on the reserves and off the reserves and migrating to the cities, and how the population is changing in Saskatchewan, and maybe in Manitoba and Alberta, too. ... these Thunderbirds are about this culture that's kind of coming back to life again, so to speak. And they're a resurrection, so to speak. (Dion 2010, 4-5)

Dion, like Boyer, is renovating tradition by making radically personal use of existing symbols and motifs. He has relocated the Thunderbird underground as a way of setting the stage for its imminent re-emergence; it becomes in his paintings, or reliefs, a sign for a hopeful new ecology as well as a center for the convergence of a renewed Aboriginal culture. Gerald McMaster referred to the axis mundi that is established by the presence of the Thunderbird and the Mishibizhiw, the power above and the power below. Although the Thunderbird is temporarily concealed within the earthly realm in Dion's work, the vertical axis is implicit in the situation, and is reinforced by the view from directly above.

The appearance of the Thunderbird in any form is a revelation of divine power, a glimpse of the sacred, a hierophany.

At a recent gathering of the Saskatoon Bahá'í community, of which there are many members from Iran, I was elated, as I have been many times before, by the chanting of a prayer in the Persian style and language. As the supplication began my eyes closed and I began to drift upward, following the sound as though riding a column of smoke heavenward. It occurred to me then that this column of prayer is also a world tree, an axis, a means of ascent. Otto Rogers has repeatedly asserted in his carefully crafted writings that painting can be a form of prayer. He recounts in his essay, "The Intelligent Exercise of the Rational Soul":

Early in my development, a prominent Canadian Bahá'í, John Robarts, then visiting from his new home in Africa, viewed my work and commented perceptively "These paintings are prayers." It had never occurred to me to think of abstract compositions as a form of worship. In my experience as a youth, prayers were something mumbled without much feeling and often sacrificed to the drone of the church organ. Upon reflection I made a connection to the idea of supplication since in my struggle to call forth a state of ecstasy in a composition I often reached ahead of thought. (Rogers, Otto Donald Rogers 2007, 149)

Sky Glabush, now married to Rogers's daughter, Julie, in his introduction to Rogers's book, makes a related comment about a pivotal experience viewing some of Rogers's paintings. "These paintings seemed to be calling me to a higher plane, revealing a part of reality that I intuitively recognized but had never quite seen before" (Ibid 10). He goes on to explain how Rogers's paintings embody the state of prayer without the use of specific references:

Rogers has often described his efforts in the studio as a form of worship. It is not as if his work is emulating prayer, or illustrating a spiritual state; rather, the act of painting itself, when striving towards perfection, becomes a form of devotion. (Ibid)

How exactly does the act of painting become a form of devotion, and how does the painting itself become a prayer?

The work of Otto Rogers deserves particular attention in the context of this research for two reasons: first, Rogers has had a profound and lasting influence on many

of the artists of my generation; second, he has practiced with deliberate consciousness the sacred geometry that others have used unconsciously. Rogers's studio is an elegant structure of cast concrete, white plaster and rough grey cedar designed by his son-in-law Siamak Hariri, designer of the Bahá'í Temple in Chile. The heart and center of the studio is the prayer rug in the loft where Rogers led me first, as though the experience of this site was necessary for the understanding of anything else in the studio. Eliade asserts that every human creation is a replication or reenactment of the original act of creation:

A creation implies a superabundance of reality, in other words an irruption of the sacred into the world. ... It follows that every construction or fabrication has the cosmogony as paradigmatic model. The creation of the world becomes the archetype of every creative human gesture, whatever its plane of reference may be. (Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* 1959, 45)

Thus the urge to create is in its essence a yearning for the sacred, and the act of creation is a sacred act. A painting, when viewed in this way, is the marking of the site of this "irruption of the sacred" and is therefore a sacred object. This is consistent with Rogers's belief that "works of art are material manifestations of spirit" (O. D. Rogers 2010, 8). When he goes to the studio he begins at the prayer rug, then moves to the paper or the canvas and enacts creation as a sacred rite. The act of executing the painting is in itself a prayerful state, a meditation. Rogers describes the process as:

... rational but at the same time its fruition is the result of attracting a unifying "presence" to the process itself, one that becomes the very essence of the work. ... In a mysterious manner orchestration and ecstasy are a musical dance coming from behind the veil. Put another way: During the evolution of a given work, ... a certain dynamic or "ordering phenomenon" takes place in the composition, increasing its vitality and expressive power in a way that could not have been preconceived. This occurrence, although a palpable experience for many artists, cannot be expressed in words. It becomes an integral part of the whole image and remains as evidence of the mystical communion between this world and one that is invisible. (Rogers, *Otto Donald Rogers* 2007, 149)

In other words, Rogers, while working, becomes an open and willing conduit, much like the shaman, allowing spiritual forces to make themselves manifest on the material plane.

While respect for Rogers's work is almost universal, the loftiness of purpose suggested by this connection between art and spirituality has often been greeted by

avoidance or outright cynicism. However, I can testify through personal experience that Rogers, through both his paintings and his personal presence, has had a profound effect on a generation of artists in Saskatoon by demonstrating, through the authenticity of his personal example, the possibility of attaining such an elevated objective. He was already an important inspiration to me as a young artist before I knew anything of the Bahá'í faith, but during my high school years (1969-73) a wave of Bahá'í influence swept the city of Saskatoon and carried a large number of my peers with it. This was a time that was definitely confused (I don't think it was just me), a time that was crossing from hopeful materialism and progress into something very uncertain: mystical quests borrowed and stolen from all the cultures of the earth; desperate and radical attempts to break barriers and understand something beyond what we already knew. Otto Rogers offered a new departure, an art that was just as wild and wonderful as anything being offered by contemporary American or European artists, but it was authentically his, and it was from Saskatoon, from the prairies. Many of my friends became Bahá'ís at this time. I accompanied some of them to a Fireside at the Rogers home in 1970 where I saw some of Rogers's paintings in progress in his home studio. This encounter had a profound effect on me.

By this time Rogers had been engaged in a visionary enterprise for a decade, as he described in our interview:

I think it was because of the initial experience that I had when I came back to Canada from the University, and I stepped into the Saskatoon arts scene, and I found it to be so supportive: the artists mutually encouraged each other, supported each others' work, had an open discourse on the nature of art, were not threatened by new ideas, for the most part. And I thought, "My God, if this could only be projected! Many many youth, young people who were talented, could have this mindset of tolerance and openness, and search after the most progressive ideas. If a whole community could create a whole climate of such, if it could include the crafts and painting and sculpture ..." (O. D. Rogers 2010, 43)

I know that his extraordinarily powerful personality dominated the University of Saskatchewan Art Department throughout much of his tenure (1959-88). I was too stubborn, or perhaps afraid to join that institution as well, but I was intensely aware of the work of those who did, particularly those artists who were just a few years older than I was. Talking to them many years later in the course of the interviews for this thesis, many

agreed, whether Bahá'í or not, that Otto Rogers had been an important influence on their artistic development and an inspiring example of what an artist ought to be. Les Potter (1947–), sculptor, and husband to painter Alicia Popoff, says that he became an artist because of Otto Rogers's influence during his studies at the University of Saskatchewan (Popoff 2010, 27). Greg Hardy neither studied with Rogers nor did he become a Bahá'í, nevertheless, he testified to the importance of Rogers's influence on his painting practice:

Otto is very inspirational to me. I always liked his work ... I ended up talking to him a couple of times at the Lake [Emma], and they were profound conversations. ... He is a great artist. ... I was actually trying to do that with my own work, when I was making the landscapes up in the studio. They were really inner landscapes ... and that's why I respected Otto. He was trying to put a spiritual twist on everything and I felt that, at some level. The same with my own work. I wanted it to communicate in a spiritual way to others. (Hardy 2010, 16)

Even those who are not enamored of him personally agree on the excellence of Rogers's painting and his remarkable charisma.

Those who have written about Rogers's work invariably stress the importance of the Bahá'í faith to the personal development of the artist, and often invoke an associated mystical power to explain the success of his work. As Keith Bell writes in an early catalogue, "At this time [while studying with Wynona Mulcaster] he did not equate religion with artistic motivation, but this became clear to him when he became a member of the Bahá'í Faith while in the United States. From then on the search for truth in painting and in his religion became synonymous" (K. Bell 1977). In other words, painting and religion became inseparable aspects of Rogers's life and work. Bell goes on to say that Rogers's decision to become a Bahá'í was "an act which confirmed a growing conviction that art was a reflection of the truth, a process reflecting a higher ideal. This led in turn to a new sense of completeness which rapidly came to be reflected in his paintings" (Ibid). As Bell observes, the "higher ideal" is responsible for the "completeness" of the paintings, attesting to the centrality of Rogers's religious conviction to his art.

George Moppett begins his catalogue essay with a comparison to Japanese poetry and the metaphor of landscape as a mirror of interior reality.

Basho's poems are not only descriptive of external events in nature but also mirror the author's innermost thoughts. Landscapes had become for him landscapes of the spirit. With the utmost economy of language and use of dynamic relationships he achieved a wealth of associations. The meanings of his poems do not surface through casual encounter for much is left unsaid. Only through contemplation is content revealed. (Moppett, Otto Rogers: A Survey 1973-1982 1982, 4)



Figure 47 Otto Rogers, *Blue Morning*, 1975
121.9 x 121.9 cm
Reproduced by permission of the artist.

Of course Moppett is referring to Rogers's paintings, which he clearly admires greatly. He insists that "the importance of the artist's faith in the generation of his images cannot be overstated" (Ibid 21) but does not elaborate apart from a mention of the role of unity as the resolution of apparent opposites in both life and work. Moppett also quotes Bahá'u'lláh, the central figure of the Bahá'í Faith, and the source of Rogers's inspiration. Most of his essay, however, is a detailed description of the physical facts of the work, the texture and tactility of the surface, and a careful avoidance of the spiritual implications.

The general reluctance to address spiritual matters with any directness is hardly surprising, given the unquestioned supremacy of scientific materialism since the modern era, especially in academia, and the vast spectrum of radical, often farcical expressions of spirituality that flourished as a result of this imbalance. Artists may have resorted to such dubious measures to find their inspiration, but serious scholars did not openly admit to spiritual inclinations or religious affiliations of any kind. As Greg Hardy remarked, “I was told so many times, ‘Don’t ever, ever put *spiritual* in a grant application.’ Because it’s a dirty word” (Hardy 2010, 16). However, in the case of Rogers’s work, to avoid the subject of spirituality is to miss the point of not only the artist’s intent and method, but also the potential effect of the painting.

Much of the writing about Rogers centers on his childhood experiences of the prairie landscape. For example, Norman Zepp, Saskatoon-based curator and expert on Inuit sculpture, quotes Rogers’s story about his daily walks to and from school, or out to the pasture to fetch the cattle:

These daily trips were as much a journey into the mind as they were over the prairie earth. ... I loved the light and I knew there was illumination. All things were moving and I knew that my motion had a Mover. I saw in this environment a part of the creation and without hesitation I loved its Creator. (MacKay 1978)

Yet Zepp concludes that Rogers is not a religious artist because he does not paint icons. Instead, he attributes the impetus for Rogers’s work to the landscape itself. Indeed, Rogers’s early paintings (see Figure 47) have the form of prairie landscapes: a horizon, clouds, isolated trees, a great space filled with light. Even later works, less literal still, retain the space and light, referring back to that original experience of the Divine. The use of elements, such as the horizon, that clearly make reference to the natural world, are not renderings of a particular place, but instead, “the landscape, what he observed and observes, has been interiorized and become a part of his way of seeing. ... The landscape is in his paintings because he sees and because he is creating a pictorial object” (Heath 32). Rogers has succeeded in making use of these elements, as other prairie painters have, to create a metaphor for the experience of the sacred.

The structural organization of Rogers’s paintings is a geometric construct, rather than an observation of nature, as in Hardy’s or Cowley’s work. This geometry is based on

Arnheim's dyadic system of the centric and eccentric forces that are inherent in all works of art. The eccentric force is exemplified in painting primarily by its strictly imposed rectangular frame, an artificial boundary that stands for all other centers and influences, remote and external to the picture. The centric force is that which attracts us to the focal point of the picture, its internal subject. In addition to this explicit, planar structure, Arnheim proposes an implied extra-planar requirement, that of transcendence, which he stipulates as a spiral movement within the picture. Rogers acknowledges this geometric structure within his work:



Figure 48 Otto Rogers, *In Celebration of the Nightingale's Song*, 1981
Acrylic, charcoal on canvas
152.6 x 183.4 cm
Collection of the Mendel Art Gallery
Reproduced by permission of the artist.

So he [Arnheim] said that most pictorial engagement has to do with pictorial vertical, horizontal, and diagonal, but he said that this alone, even though this measures the universe, so to speak, it doesn't satisfy the longing of the human soul to aspire to transcend the limitations of measurement, and so he did diagrams of all these paintings, and took note of a spiral movement. ... when I looked at the best of my work, I found, to my amazement, that there was always this clear spiral. In fact, I named a lot of my paintings "rotation," for that reason that the imagery seemed to be rotating or leaving its fixed place, on the picture plane. (O. D. Rogers 2010, 23)

The rigorous limitations of the rectangular plane, the grid and the spiral is, according to Rogers, inherent in the art of painting, just as lines, verses, rhythmic structure and melody constitute the formal structure of song-writing.

I'm always amazed at how unlimited geometry is in poetic expression. That there seems to be no end to the power of geometric order to reflect the human condition, or to reflect the intricacy or the subtlety of mind! ... The point I'm trying to make here is that geometry is fundamental to pictorial structure, because the rectangle is a geometric unit, after all, so you're basing your whole discipline of pictorial art on a geometric unit, so it's not surprising that geometry would be a major player in pictorial space-making. (O. D. Rogers 2010, 12-3)

In any art form, it is the restrictions, when mastered, that offer liberation and transcendence.



Figure 49 Otto Rogers, *Destiny and Free Will*, 2005
Acrylic on canvas
99.1 x 132.1cm
Private Collection
Reproduced by permission of the artist.

The elements of this geometry are present in many of Rogers's paintings, but plainly evident in *In Celebration of the Nightingale's Song* (Figure 48). The frame of

Rogers's favored square format is echoed not only by the strong vertical spine that divides the piece symmetrically, and the barely visible horizon, but also by the placement of the two dots equidistant from the spine, like eyes or nipples. The sweeping diagonal sets up a rotation around the center of gravity, a rotation that is poised to erupt, like the screw of a propeller, into the pictorial space that is established between the elements of the painting. Rogers speaks of this implied space as "the space between" or "God's breath" because it is the rarified substance out of which the picture takes its life and establishes the space of the painted world. The spiral movement occurs along an axis perpendicular to the picture lane, thus transcending it, and pointing to the next level of existence. The metaphor is underscored by the title, as the "Nightingale" is a reference to Bahá'u'lláh.



Figure 50 Otto Rogers, *Two Floating Paintings in a Landscape*, 2006
Acrylic on paper
55.9 x 76.2cm
Collection of the artist
Reproduced by permission.

Thus the manifestation in these paintings of Arnheim's geometry is not unlike the sacred geometry outlined in the previous pages: it is fixed around a center; there is a radiating or rotating force emanating from the center; multiple levels of existence are

indicated with a means of ascent connecting them. In some cases there may be a confusion of orientation such that the horizontal plane of the earth may be represented as receding into pictorial space, or it may be represented by the picture plane itself. As a result, the direction of ascent, or the axis mundi, may in some cases be indicated as parallel to the vertical sides of the frame, and in others as perpendicular to the picture plane, as in the cases of elevated perspective. I wonder if this latter tendency could be in part a result of Rogers's habit of working with the canvas in a horizontal orientation on the floor or on a table? In any case, the symbolism remains the same: the painting marks the site of an entrance to another level of being.

There is a sense in some of Rogers's paintings that the movement between realms is not necessarily upward, but may be more like passing through or around a curtain or similar obstruction. In *Destiny and Free Will* (Figure 49) a view of a distant land or sea is almost completely obscured by the intense blue angular spiral that moves away from the pictorial space toward the viewer. Nevertheless, there are other elements that advance even nearer: the tiny planetoids that often populate Rogers's cosmos. These help to suggest an almost infinite depth to the pictorial world and lend a sense of awe and grandeur. This sense is also due to the dramatic use of light, as virtually all writers on the subject have emphasized; a light which, in combination with the indefinite and almost limitless space, opens an entire world within the confines of the picture. The blue veil is in itself strongly appealing, even seductive in its richness, yet the desire to pass beyond to the openness and light is irresistible. The image of the veil as a metaphor for our inability to see the entire truth from this perspective is a kind of vertical horizon.

Two Floating Paintings in a Landscape, in Figure 50, presents a different situation. This spacious image seems to be a view from a very elevated perspective, as though looking down at the earth or the sea from orbit. The two floating "paintings" could as well be islands, ships or cities, but in any case they are centres of attraction in a vast vacant space. The relationship between them has been amplified by the rippling splatters and smudges that mark the interval, an almost magnetic or electrical energy reverberating across the gap. I am reminded of the situation described by Black Elk, in which everything that takes place on this level of being is the shadow of an event in the other world. In this picture, it appears that the blue "world" that clings to the margin is

much nearer, while the other is more remote, far below. The patterns of energy ascend and descend like the angels on Jacob's ladder, but in this view, we are at the top of the ladder looking down.

All art is metaphor; the forms within the painted surface refer to things outside the picture. But Rogers, as a Bahá'í, believes that the phenomenal world is itself a metaphor, a complex set of signs that point to a greater world beyond even this grandiose frame. Thus the painting is a metaphor that points to another metaphor, a reminder that the entire phenomenal world and all that it contains are signs of a surpassing order. But more than this, a painting, certainly the paintings of Otto Rogers can be a means of passage, or at least a window to the greater realm. As we gaze upon the canvas our consciousness passes through and beyond its surface to become aware of the presence of the sacred. In this sense the painting is a membrane that allows selective access to the world beyond.

The function of the axis mundi, or the world tree, is to remind us that there is another level of consciousness, that it is not only possible, but desirable for us to strive to surpass our present state and rise to a new level of ability and responsibility. The archetype is represented in an inexhaustible range of forms: Keevil's idyllic garden; Kotyk's iconic figure; Bertieg's mystical symbol; Sapp's vision; Boyer's mandalas; Harbuz's omnipresence; Dion's optimism. The tree stands at the center of the garden marking the locus of our activities, and the point where the sacred has made itself known to us, in the heart of the numinous land.

Conclusion

When I began this journey I was intrigued by the curious relationship between landscape and formalism in prairie painting. I was also troubled by the seeming lack of relationship between First Nations and settler cultures. I was far too intimidated to approach the matter that was closest to my heart, that is, the matter of spiritual interests, intentions and influences on the part of the artists, and spiritual content in the paintings. My discomfort was exacerbated by my personal position suspended somewhere between my Christian upbringing, the Indigenous spirituality that so strongly attracted me in my youth, the Bahá'í Faith that I eventually claimed as my own, and the overwhelmingly secular atmosphere of Academia. These questions were all superimposed on the background of the prairie itself, the numinous source of mystery and beauty that was (and remains) threatened by imminent environmental disaster.

As I spoke with the artists it soon became apparent that a number of them share my interest in spiritual matters but are also cautious about expressing it openly. In a few cases I was taken by surprise by very strong statements of spiritual intent from artists whom I had known only as secular, and who have no religious affiliation whatever. As a result, I felt suddenly encouraged to shift the focus of my investigation to include questions of a spiritual nature. Many of the artists also spoke strongly about environmental issues and a desire to address them through their art.

At the same time I examined paintings in the collections of the University of Saskatchewan, the Mendel Art Gallery, First Nations University and the Saskatchewan Arts Board, as well as in commercial galleries including: the Stall Gallery, The Red Shift, Art Placement, Inc. and the Darrell Bell Gallery in Saskatoon; the Scott Gallery, the Douglas Udell Gallery, and the Roberts Gallery in Edmonton; Mysteria Gallery, the Nouveau Gallery, the Assiniboia Gallery and the McIntyre Gallery in Regina. I also visited the studios of Garry Berteig, Heather Cline, Lorenzo Dupuis, Jonathan Forrest, David Garneau, Clint Hunker, Degen Lindner, Ruby Mah, Grant McConnell, Anne McElroy, Alicia Popoff, Otto Rogers, Robert Scott, Robert Sinclair, David Thauberger and Marianne Watchel.

I began to notice in many of the paintings structural motifs derived from ancient traditions such as the mandala and the Medicine Wheel. The fact that these structural similarities occur in paintings from diverse cultures and made by artists with varied levels of exposure to academic institutions began to suggest a commonality, if not universality in the expression, through painting, of a spiritual relation to the phenomenal world and a corresponding obligation toward the natural environment. Following this observation, I began to search for landscape and formalist paintings that clearly exemplified these structural characteristics.

Because I was not seeking generalizations about all prairie painting, but drawing attention to one significant aspect of prairie landscape and formalism, I made no attempt at statistical sampling. Neither was I attempting to distinguish prairie painting from the work of other times and places, nor to characterize it as unique in this regard, but merely to understand the painting that surrounds me through a broad exploration. I sought evidence of structural commonality in the widest possible range of pertinent works, with particular attention to the following categories: 1) roughly equal numbers of men and women; 2) examples of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal artists from a variety of cultural backgrounds; 3) academically trained as well as unschooled artists; 4) acclaimed as well as less-known artists; 5) examples spanning the last half-century; 6) the widest possible range of subject and treatment. As a result I explored whole categories of painting that had previously held little interest for me, and found surprising examples of confirmation where I least expected them.

As direct physical evidence for a sacred geometry gradually accrued, I also found theoretical confirmation in the writings of Otto Rogers, Rudolf Arnheim, Carl Jung and especially Mircea Eliade. Rogers has, for many years, been systematically elaborating on the structural geometry observed by Arnheim and writing about his discoveries. Jung, of course, first postulated the existence of archetypes, and Eliade made the explicit connection between archetypal structures and the subjective experience of the sacred in the form of the hierophany. The sacred geometry that I have observed is not only consistent with these theories but also results in a unifying principle that embraces all the questions posed and forms a nexus where these apparently disparate concerns are revealed as aspects of a single human necessity.

As I have demonstrated, the practice of painting, regardless of cultural norms and forms, is based on the nature of the space we inhabit on the surface of a planetary body, in other words, on the land. The nature of personal experience is the inescapable sense that we inhabit the center of the cosmos, but this sense can be sublimated, through art, and transposed onto the community and its environs as geopiety. Furthermore, I take it as axiomatic that humans, or at least many humans, by our nature, have a relationship with an extra-mundane realm that is founded on one or both of two complementary subjective experiences: a more or less fleeting awareness of the sacred as it reveals itself in this world; a yearning for the sacred and a corresponding curiosity about the realm beyond. This is the basis of what has come to be loosely referred to as spirituality. Of course, the word “spirituality” and all others associated with it are fraught with difficulty, especially at this time of intense materiality. But the subjective experience of a force animating and emanating from the phenomenal world appears through my research to be extremely common. Eliade suggests that not only all art works, but all human creations are the result of a movement from the extra-mundane realm into this world. My research proves Eliade’s suppositions, as many of the artists that I spoke with confirm, whether in spiritual language or not, that they respond to mystical sources of inspiration in the land when they approach the canvas. The syllogism would appear to be: their painting is based on the land; they perceive the land as sacred; therefore painting is a sacred act and the result is a sacred object.

The two most abundant forms of prairie painting since settlement have been landscape views and formal abstractions, although some artists, as we have seen, prefer to overlook the distinction. While it is easy to assign nostalgic motives to the former and intellectual elitism to the latter, it is possible to view both as responses in the current language to a numinous presence in the land. This provides an answer to my underlying questions. Why does landscape painting have such an enduring significance on the prairie? It retains its potency as a cultural medium because it is an open symbol of our (human) relation to the land, capable of unlimited content, and a metaphor for the spiritual realm. Why is abstraction such a powerful tendency among prairie painters? Abstraction is not a modern invention, but a timeless tradition, predating settlement by many centuries, that has been recently renovated. It is inherently human to seek codified

expressions of the ineffable mystery through simplified structures, just as poets seek to condense complex impressions into concentrated forms. Both landscape and abstraction, two aspects of the same response to the prairie, have been used extensively to express a sense of wonder at the numinous in the land, or alternatively a yearning for it.

It may be safe to assume that people of all times and cultures have thought of the other world, the spirit world as changeless, at least in relation to the time frame of our human lives. Thus, the numina of the prairie and adjacent woodlands have always been present and continue to make themselves known to any who stay and give their attention. The artists of the most distant discernable past made use of the visual language provided by their traditions to celebrate the presence of the spirits of the land, creating cosmic schemes or maps in the form of geometric designs. David Garneau remarks on the relationship between Bob Boyer's paintings and the mysterious content of the parfleche paintings: "Boyer's paintings, like much traditional Aboriginal material culture, appear to be non-objective pattern making when they are, in fact, coded witnesses" (Garneau, Bob Boyer 2009, 113). That they are coded is evident, but that they are witnesses is an important observation that reinforces the notion of Eliade's hierophany. The artists who created these paintings may have been marking the site of a movement of spirit into the phenomenal world. They did so in the language that was meaningful to them: an archetypal radially symmetry. While the details of the geometry continue to shift and mutate according to the personal inflection of the artist, the motif reappears across time and cultures in works as diverse as Boyer and Ronald Bloore. The artists I have discussed respond in their work to "irruptions of the sacred," expressing their awe in the visual language that is available to them at the time, grasping at every new option in an attempt to picture the inexpressible, and to praise the unknowable. The clearest examples are those that have been most repeated in well-established traditions such as the parfleche paintings; the most surprising are those that emerge in the intuitive efforts of untrained artists, such as W.C. McCargar, working without the foundation and constraints of an established tradition.

In addition to the archetypal geometry there is also testimony in the statements made by prairie painters about their own motivations. Greg Hardy makes a particularly strong declaration, especially in the light of his otherwise apparently secular nature:

But I need to paint for my soul to be anywhere close to being whole or anywhere close to being alive, I guess. I don't know if my soul can be alive, but ... I don't want to go too far out on this but painting is, really, a form of spiritual practice. And it's certainly my spiritual practice, is to be able to paint. (Hardy 2010, 8)

Thus the abundant body of landscape paintings that Hardy continues to augment is the physical record of his quest to express powerfully felt responses to his surroundings, a quest that he considers a spiritual undertaking. Grant McConnell is another painter whose work seems to be primarily historical and political, yet as he testifies, he came to Saskatoon originally for the purpose of studying with Otto Rogers because of his professed spirituality, a quality that McConnell continues to admire. Wally Dion declares that his interest has shifted from the primarily political to the more spiritual aspects of his cultural expressions; David Garneau states that his work is primarily about sacred sites; Eve Kotyk says that her work is about the "little quiver of awe" (Koty 2010, 10). Heather Cline did not speak directly about spiritual matters, but she did describe some recent work as an investigation inspired by the recent passing of her father. She was painting views of the highway as though from a traveling vehicle, with exits from the main road, and considered this to be a metaphor for the passing of a loved one, something like the disappearance of the dragonfly nymph. Thus her temporally layered landscape views were obliquely aimed at a spiritual question (Cline 2010, 4).

If there are other painters who do not provide strong verbal testimony for a spiritual motivation it may be due to a disinclination to speak of such matters in a predominantly profane climate, as already discussed. Or it may be that they are simply using different language. Anne McElroy, for example, stated that she found her inspiration in a certain ineffable quality:

It's not the object itself [that inspires the painting]?

No, but it's more likely a shape, you know, sort of curvature, or a lifeness in there, that ... I could probably say something about that, but I'm not sure how to articulate it exactly. I think that that might enter into the realm of something more personal. I mean ... you don't know and you can't know. ... And I'm not even sure how far I'd have to go in to say well what is it about that, but it's precious, you know? ... You have to find the precious part. ... That's the lifeness. (McElroy 2010, 9-10)

McElroy is clearly referring to something profound that is difficult to express and too intimate to share, whether this is spiritual or not. Her words recall Cowley's statement that her first mark is "anything at all that strikes me as most important." Jonathan Forrest made a similar reference to certain indescribable environmental stimuli that led to paintings, "noticing a particular way light catches things" (J. Forrest 2010, 7); Lorna Russell watches for "extra special colours." There is also the possibility that some painters are unaware of spiritual tendencies or desires, or cannot frame them as such because of fixed ideas about religion. However, even when there is absence of verbal testimony the physical evidence of the sacred geometry is often present in the paintings, as the examples already given and numerous others reveal.

The most obvious feature of the prairie landscape and of the staggering number of paintings that have been made to represent it is the overwhelming predominance of the sky. The sky is the "vault of heaven," a commonly recognized symbol of the transcendent realm, and a visual cue within the painting that demands the ascending vertical movement of a heavenward gaze. The horizon is the primary division of space in these paintings, an unmistakable indication of multiple levels of existence, an innate limit of human perception and the implied presence of a world beyond this one. Thus the entire genre of prairie landscape painting, even in its most common forms, can be viewed as spiritual in its metaphorical content, heavenly as well as earthly.

The vertical movement itself becomes an archetypal expression in the form of the world tree or axis mundi. A few prairie painters have fixed on the symbol of the individual archetypal tree, but many more have gravitated northward to the boreal forest where the vertical is everywhere the counterpoint to the surface of the lake. In a still more sublimated form, the axis may be represented by an elevated perspective, that is, of someone who has already ascended and looks down on the earthly picture below. This is a surprisingly frequent occurrence in prairie painting, found in the unschooled paintings of Ann Harbuz as well as in the well-informed work of Bob Boyer who was exposed to a wide range of cultural influences including an academic education. It is also an important feature of the visionary paintings of Allen Sapp, who was aware of a variety of influences but made minimal use of them, turning instead to his personal vision to express the spirit of his land and people.

In the work of both Perehudoff and Rogers the horizon itself has sometimes been inexplicably turned ninety degrees to form a vertical division of the canvas. This may be no more than a playful experimentation on the part of Perehudoff, rather than a deliberate reference to the axis, but in the case of Rogers there is a stated purpose to the shift. In the 1992 film *Approach to a Sacred Place*, Rogers states that he created these works in response to an experience in the Holy Land, where he resided at the time (Davidson 1992). In the Bahá'í gardens that surrounded his workplace, he was strongly affected by a particular narrow avenue that passed between two walls of cypress trees. He found in this physical formation a metaphor for the passage beyond the veil. Thus, the entire extended series of works with vertical divisions can be seen as a reference to a narrow or difficult passage to a realm beyond.

Many of the prairie painters of the modern era, whether they inclined more to the representation of the landscape, or more to the microcosm of formalism, began to give their attention primarily to the nature and function of the painted surface. This was manifested as either a kind of membrane through which selective access to an alternate awareness might be achieved, as in the work of Reta Cowley, Dorothy Knowles, Lorna Russell and Clint Hunker, or as a mirror in which the artist, the viewer and the surrounding world were reflected and refined, as in the diverse works of Robert Hurley, Arthur McKay or Jonathan Forrest. Although innovative in form, these paintings perform a timeless function related to the contemplative aspect of the mandala.

One of the most fascinating and heartening discoveries for me has been the confirmation that—rather than a single narrative recounting the “progress” of European traditions through Modernism to the end of painting—there have actually been a number of parallel streams of development running through prairie history, streams that continue to flow. Gerald McMaster calls for a shared history, a history that he likens to the twin rows of wampum beads that are joined at intervals like the ladder of a DNA molecule:

The double helix is somewhat like the two-row wampum with the difference that the two strands of the double helix spiral upwards and are connected by rungs, like a ladder. If the strands represent temporality and the rungs spatiality, then the parallel, spiraling strands can signify contemporaneous periods, while the rungs are its discursive effects—material, linguistic, social, political, economic, and aesthetic—that affect/effect the object. In this model there is continuous dialogue,

debate, and struggle. Like the DNA molecule this is the constituent part of who we are. This is how I see our interrelatedness. ... Why not position Aboriginal historic works alongside other contemporary historic works to show an interrelated perspective? (McMaster, *Our (Inter) Related History* 2002, 7)

I see the work of Wally Dion as a prime example of a rung, a point of exchange on this ladder. The streams have recently begun to recombine, allowing contemporary prairie artists to borrow more freely from each other in multiple directions of exchange, gradually creating a new experimental language of painting that may eventually precipitate into a new painting tradition.

McMaster's vision of a shared history could readily be expanded to include multiple cultural streams in a shifting dance of curiosity, exchange, struggle and mutual representation. Indeed, it would undoubtedly be possible to follow the course of traditional First Nations art and the innovative influence of Metis culture through the settlement period with its numerous influences from folk cultures of Eastern Europe, Scandinavia and Asia as well as those of the dominant practices of Western Europe. The complex combination of cultural perspectives that has recently begun to coalesce makes contemporary prairie artists unusually well placed to explore the unlimited possibilities of painting. We have been linked, through the legacy of empire, to the entire planet, and through technological advances to great spans of history, making both the current practices and the traditional conventions of many artists available as a shared inheritance. We have also been linked through recent genetic research that reveals the fallacy of race and the biological unity of humanity. We are all truly scions from a common root, the aspen metaphor mentioned by Garneau in reference to Metis people, and are more closely related than we knew. Moreover, we are at liberty to exchange ideas and practices in an unprecedented way.

Wally Dion's *Thunderbird* images, for example, speak not only of a powerful rebirth of Aboriginal culture, but of a renewed awareness of the sacred nature of the physical environment and our shared responsibility toward it. The sacred geometry I have examined in this thesis can thus be understood as the sign of a hopeful prospect for the continuing growth of prairie painting, for significant cultural healing and a renewed ecology. The sacred geometry and geopiety evident in prairie painting establish a locus

for activity, create an order that surrounds and sanctifies it and give us a common archetypal language.

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Vita

Kim Ennis was born in Saskatoon in 1956. Drawing and painting independently until 1980 he then became a protégé of the late W. H. Epp and worked mainly in bronze, stone and wood for the next two decades. In 2003 Mr. Ennis was hired as Artist in Residence in Melville, Saskatchewan, where he served for three years. In 2009 he completed a Bachelor of Fine Arts in painting with Great Distinction while working simultaneously at the Mendel Art Gallery. He is currently teaching at the Center for Continuing and Distance Education in the University of Saskatchewan Certificate of Art and Design program. Mr. Ennis is represented by Art Placement, Inc.